

INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE SERIES  
for  
AUSTRALIAN NATURAL BURIAL GROUND  
PIONEERS

Guideline 1: Introduction to Series

*Introduction to the Series*

*Definitions*

*Ethos of the Natural Burial*



Australian  
Natural Burial  
Project

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# **INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE FOR AUSTRALIAN NATURAL BURIAL GROUND PIONEERS**

## **INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF SERIES**

With one eye on experience in the UK, USA and New Zealand, a general interest in natural burial continues to grow in Australia. Community advocates and actors have emerged, and some traditional cemetery operators have responded with the establishment, or renaming, of a small number of ‘natural burial sections’ situated within existing cemetery grounds. While appearing to be a step in a ‘natural’ direction, these sections are constrained by embedded cemetery practices, and confusion is creeping into the public mind.

As we move from proposition to action, this Guideline explains the ethos of the natural burial concept, and provides definitional clarity as to what exactly constitutes a ‘genuine’ natural burial ground. This is the starting point for interested individuals, community groups and funeral industry professionals to develop the necessary knowledge and direction to propose and implement an eco-conscious Natural Burial Ground in their town, city or region.

## DEFINITIONS

### ***Natural Burial:***

Return of human remains as directly as possible to the earth, while adhering to all legal, cultural and practical requirements. Non-embalmed remains are contained within a minimal-resource, bio-degradable coffin or shroud, and buried at the minimum legal depth to promote natural decomposition.

### ***Natural Burial Ground:***

A life-centred memorial place, not part of a traditional cemetery model, set aside exclusively for natural burial, and characterised by the existence or restoration of native vegetation. An eco-conscious, natural burial ground has a finite active life cycle. Once the burial ground capacity is reached, operational maintenance is replaced by minimal-cost, landscape preservation practices, and the site remains a natural flora and fauna reserve.

## THE ETHOS OF NATURAL BURIAL & THE NATURE OF NATURAL BURIAL GROUNDS

### ***General remarks***

The act of natural burial should, ideally, take place outside of the limiting confines of traditional cemetery models, and result in demonstrable benefits to the ecosystem through landscape preservation and ecology restoration.

The Project identifies two broad types of stand-alone, eco-conscious natural burial grounds: Restoration Natural Burial Grounds, and Conservation Natural Burial Grounds. Of course, it is conceivable (and likely) that Natural Burial Grounds that embody elements of both these types will emerge, and still conform to the Project's definition.

Achieving conceptual purity (Natural Burial Grounds with true ecological relevance) can be challenging in the face of existing system constraints and

old habits, and may be practically impossible in some places. When proposing a Natural Burial Ground in your area, it is good for philosophical and practical reasons to be clear about project objectives, scale and the level of aspiration: the type of Natural Burial Grounds intended, and what is practically possible within the local context.

One of the key aims of the Project is to promote and foster the development of these types of genuine, natural burial grounds in Australia. At present, there are two private Natural Burial Grounds in South Australia, and another (public facility) is nearing implementation in NSW. There is also a well organised community lobbying campaign in regional Tasmania. At the time of writing, there were seven areas within existing cemeteries around Australia designated as 'natural burial sections'. While offering a more naturally landscaped aesthetic (compared to the traditionally memorialised cemeteries) these facilities (discussed below) do not meet the Project's criteria to be designated as natural burial grounds.

Fortunately, advocacy has already resulted in the re-interpretation and/or amendment of legislation in most States of Australia, to readily enable the establishment of genuine, stand-alone natural burial grounds. The Burial and Cremation Act (2013) of South Australia clearly distinguishes between cemeteries and natural burial grounds for the first time. The Bill was championed by the late Hon Dr Bob Such MP, who recognised the need for new metropolitan burial space in South Australia. Similarly, in New South Wales, the Cemeteries and Crematoria Act (2013) specifically states, as one of its Objects, the promotion of environmental sustainability with specific reference to natural and private land burial. Both these Act's, and supporting policy documents, recognise the concept of natural burial as a practical, multi-benefit strategy.

## RESTORATION NATURAL BURIAL GROUNDS

A 'Restoration Natural Burial Ground' contemplates the act of natural burial on a site in need of revegetation and local bio-remediation works.

In the 'purest form' the re-creation of habitat in an Restoration Natural Burial Ground would employ structurally balanced (upper, medium and lower storeys), locally indigenous plants. However, there may be reasons, even ecological ones, for choosing other complementary species, or more usually, for planting particular species at densities not exactly imitating those found in Nature.

The existence, or development, of a community based, non-profit funeral service is an ideal adjunct to a Restoration Natural Burial Grounds. It allows families the assurance of a competently conducted funeral service in return for a financial contribution to the restoration of the Natural Burial Ground site itself, and potentially wider landscape-scale ecology projects. From this concept flow many potential local opportunities, such as employment, various personal services, enrichment of local landscape amenity, educational site tours and personal opportunities, such as direct reconnection with the major and important processes of life and death.

In circumstances where the services of a traditional funeral director are to be utilised at a Natural Burial Ground, a planned Guideline in this series will provide the necessary level of understanding to optimise and facilitate the resulting process.

### ***Use of 'greenfield' sites***

It is arguably easier to establish an Natural Burial Ground on a greenfield site (cleared agricultural or grazing land, or large-block residential land) in a rural or metro fringe setting. Such sites allow for simpler initial assessment, ease of access, and may contribute more to carbon capture and storage through building new natural habitat or extension of existing vegetation. It follows that this type of site might be more helpful in carbon capture, or supporting

larger populations of endangered species, than habitat preservation alone - as long as the new habitat contains appropriate species and associations. Hence, Restoration Ecology is a significant element of such projects.

The 'clean slate' quality of a greenfield site has advantages in the landscape design phase by enabling a more seamless accommodation of human needs (during the active life of the burial ground) within the new environment than in bushland settings (see below) where the ecosystem is a given.

Site locality is a critical factor, with the obvious disadvantage of rural sites being distant from population: they are not as easy to access or visit. Location near railways and bus routes and suitability for day trips should be kept in mind. Later site design and staged planning will benefit from having thought through this social interface from early in the process.

### ***Reuse of old quarries and metropolitan wasteland sites***

While having potential to be ecologically helpful, complicating factors such as site contamination and the need for extensive preliminary site works may impact conceptual purity, necessitating 'work-arounds' or ecological offsets such as plantings elsewhere to create balance.

### ***Multiple use of metropolitan sites***

Such locations as roadsides, non-flooding river land and railway corridors may in the future lend themselves to combinations of nature restoration/conservation and natural burial practices. There is much scope for innovative thinking here.

A subset of multiple use that is emerging is the Permaculture Natural Burial Ground. Often in co-location with site sensitive conservation or restoration, a burial ground can be mindfully integrated into the constructed or functional ecosystems that form the basis of Permaculture design.



## **CONSERVATION NATURAL BURIAL GROUNDS**

A 'Conservation Natural Burial Ground' contemplates the act of natural burial on an already vegetated site: perhaps pristine or remnant vegetation, a remediated area, a planted woodlot, or the bushy parts of a golf course.

With this type of 'bushland' Natural Burial Ground, ecological advice is relevant to minimise disturbance. Here the natural burial concept can allow for a complementary dual use of the land, and the fact that human remains are buried on the site can complement the establishment of Natural Heritage Covenants that protect the habitat from development long term. Developers appreciate knowing that land is unavailable, so they don't waste time pushing for development there.

This is a valuable aspect that may be considered in the context of State and national scale wildlife corridors, climate change refuges and endangered species preservation. It can also provide an incentive for farmers and developers to leave bushland in place. In the United Kingdom (UK), many genuine Natural Burial Grounds are located on private, farming land, providing a modest income stream that assists with natural restoration works.

## **WHY 'NATURAL BURIAL SECTIONS' IN CEMETERIES ARE NOT NATURAL BURIAL GROUNDS**

Practically speaking, a 'natural burial' (as defined above) could be conducted at a gravesite set amongst towering headstones in a traditional cemetery. In such a setting the potential benefit of a natural burial would be limited to a small reduction in resources used for the funeral, and the immediate satisfaction of the wishes of the deceased and their family. Likewise, natural burials in 'natural burial sections' do not support the full potential of the natural burial concept. That is to say, they fail to address the underlying call for an affordable, genuinely sustainable return of the body to nature. Moreover, there is no wider, or continuing, benefit to the community or the

natural environment, particularly in the sense of supporting significant habitat preservation or restoration.

This is an important distinction because left unchallenged, the commercial operation of 'natural burial sections' has the potential to contribute to the type of market confusion experienced in the UK. In a recent online census of 40 UK burial sites listed on the website of a natural burial grounds association, more than half permitted headstones to be placed on gravesites, some allowed double-depth interments, seven sanctioned the use of traditional coffins and two accepted embalming. Though all were described as 'natural burial grounds', most would more accurately be characterised as 'naturally landscaped cemeteries'. At best, this situation is an unfortunate outcome of the disjointed growth of the natural burial sector in the UK, and, at worst, commercial 'greenwashing'.

In independent research from New Zealand (UMR, 2002), 34% of respondents indicated definite or strong preference for natural burial, and almost identical findings resulted from a Canadian research project. In the UK, no official records are kept, but industry estimates suggest natural burials account for only about 1% of funerals. Given there are more than 220 'green' burial sites across the UK (with the first opened in 1993) public access is not an issue, yet uptake remains a fraction of the potential indicated by the New Zealand and Canadian studies. Why? Beyond definitional confusion, the development of natural burial in the UK has been shaped by traditional cemetery and funeral models. As a result, natural burial has become a relatively expensive 'niche' offering, often referred to as the 'third option' behind cremation and traditional burial.

In common with the UK model, grave sites in natural burial sections in Australia are consistently priced at levels comparable with, or higher than, traditional sites in the same cemetery. The annual maintenance costs of a gravesite, in a natural burial section, are estimated to be approximately 10% of a traditional cemetery gravesite. However, this is not reflected in the cost

to the public because in traditional cemetery models maximum revenue is sought from *all sites* to cover the maintenance costs of the cemetery as a whole.

Natural burial advocates do not presume that a natural return to the earth will be cost free, but neither do they expect to pay a premium for making a conscious choice to preserve the environment. Natural burial in Australia can, and should, be available at a cost comparable to cremation services.

## FIRST STEPS IN PROPOSING A NATURAL BURIAL GROUND

The idea of establishing a genuine Natural Burial Ground that embraces and protects the local bio-system is one that holds considerable appeal for individuals, as well as community and environmental groups.

One of the first practical challenges faced by interested parties is the identification of an ecologically appropriate site. Even with something as natural as natural burial, there are legitimate, potential ecological risks and opportunities that need to be understood and managed.

The advice of an ecologist, or people with knowledge of local area flora and fauna, and the ability to read land character are invaluable as part of the project workup. Equally, there is no substitute for task-specific, practical knowledge, and Guidelines 2 and 3 in this series - *Environmental Considerations for the Establishment of Natural Burial Grounds* and *Assessment Procedures for Proposed Natural Burial Ground Sites* - guide the Natural Burial Ground Pioneer through the practical aspects of a preliminary site assessment process. The assessment process espoused in the Guideline is based upon the direct experience of the authors, together with a comprehensive review of current global research literature.

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*The authors are not aware of any conflict of interest in their contributions to this document. They have no current involvement in the commercial funeral industry, but do declare their involvement with the active promotion of natural burial grounds and sustainable funeral practices within private and public spheres.*

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