



THE GREENING OF PET CEMETERIES

The Green Pet-Burial Society

Pet Cemeteries, Environment & Material Culture

Over the past 100 years, many pet cemeteries were established to meet the needs of grieving families seeking a way to bury their pet's remains. Over the years, the prevailing thought was to model pet cemeteries upon trends found at human cemeteries. Those trends often reflected an American material culture and a move away from a positive connection to Nature. Consequently, the act of burying a body with simple grace and dignity was transformed to include a variety of service and product options, from vaults, expensive and nonbiodegradable caskets, and polyester casket linings to elaborate headstones and highly decorated and manicured landscapes. Additionally, those manicured lawns require significant inputs of water, pesticides, fungicides, and chemical fertilizers to stay thick and lustrous. Reinforcing this prevailing aesthetic was a new cultural disdain for simple, natural burials.

However, unlike human cemeteries, which are deeded in perpetuity, most pet cemeteries still lack this critical credential. As such, many pet cemeteries have an ironic association with notions of permanency: promoting the idea that watertight, nonbiodegradable caskets protect the body from the elements, while the cemetery itself is not deeded in perpetuity. Despite a cemetery's longevity, without this official designation there cannot be any guarantee of the cemetery's future, especially after the current cemetery owners/managers are gone.

Today, an emerging trend among human cemeteries are green burials. As before, pet cemeteries can look to human cemeteries for new developments in aftercare, and how they can be implemented in economically viable ways. Green burials simplify the entire burial process to lessen the impact on the land and natural resources, while using burials to enhance sustainability. All burial materials used (e.g., shrouds, caskets) are eco-friendly, and ground maintenance shifts from applications of toxic chemicals to eco-friendly methods, including an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program.

New Consumer Values

In most states, the laws that govern and regulate *human* cemeteries do not apply to *pet* cemeteries. As such, this has been a self-regulating industry – but that it slowly changing due to various highly publicized cases of mismanagement prompting new laws and consumer protection campaigns. Consumers are also reflecting several other important cultural shifts:

1. Eco-Friendly – Consumers are making eco-friendly choices, as they consider environmental impacts of toxic chemicals and land use on wildlife, water resources and human health.
2. Consumer Protection – Dissatisfaction with some human cemeteries, at times resulting in lawsuits, has resulted in many being wary of cemeteries. Consumer advocates encourage people to be informed, involved and have more control over funerals and burials.

3. Preplanning – People are increasingly preplanning all aspects of deathcare before the need presents itself. Consumer groups educate people about assessing and meeting their needs in advance, rather than making decisions at a time of desperation and grief (which can be costly and ultimately unsatisfying).
4. “Dust-to-Dust” – Vaults and nonbiodegradable caskets contradict burial traditions among Catholics, Jews, Muslims and others, as well as those who embrace an environmental sensibility.
5. In Perpetuity – A concern of existing and potential customers is the permanency of a gravesite. The IAFFCS has long been committed to encouraging and helping pet cemeteries become deeded in perpetuity. Doing so fulfills the purpose of a cemetery: to assure the bereaved that the cemetery will be permanently protected and to enable the deceased to ‘rest in peace’ (while eminent domain exists, such rare events may be lessened with this designation).
6. Land Use – In attempts to use less land and minimize funeral costs, many people believe that cremation is the most eco-friendly form of disposition for both, humans and their pets (without realizing the environmental costs of cremation). Yet green burials – in designated green sections of existing cemeteries and in green cemeteries – can create protected wildlife preserves. They can also be used to protect or restore natural areas and gain the coveted ‘in perpetuity’ status.
7. The Status of Pets – It was once considered odd and a waste of money to bury a departed pet in a pet cemetery. Today, many people regard their pets as family members, and their expectations for funerals, burials and cemeteries are aligned with this view.
8. Healthy Living – There is growing interest in whole foods; organic fruits, vegetables and mushrooms; local products; herbal teas; organic clothing; and nontoxic soaps, cosmetics and household products. More people are also recycling, reusing grocery bags, and demanding products with less packaging. There is also an increase in utilizing holistic health practitioners and remedies. Overall, we see a growing appreciation for simple, natural goodness.

Reimagining Pet Cemeteries – Centers of Sustainability

Pet cemeteries – as other businesses, institutions and community centers – are continually prompted to reassess their identities, practices and relationships with customers and the local community. As such, pet cemeteries can benefit by adapting to new consumer values (as summarized above).

There is no better place to begin the process than to think about death and aftercare. Cemeteries and funerals provide occasions for thinking about death: Why do we have cemeteries? What is special about our bodies? Why do people bury the remains of loved ones? How have our relationships with our pets influenced our views of nature and other animals? How do our views of death influence our views of nature, and vice versa?

Such questions also inspire deeper thought about pet cemetery among cemetery owners/managers: Is it a business? A cultural institution? A community center? A public park? A retreat for healing?

As we imagine all that a pet cemetery can be – and involve others to help inform that vision – we can recognize its place in local history, and begin to see that it can be a cultural and educational institution as well. It can also be a local center of sustainability, supported by two movements: the green burial movement (which emphasizes sustainability for burial plots and cemetery grounds), and local green business alliances (which facilitate green business practices). Fortunately, there are organizations that can support your cemetery in adopting environmentally sustainable practices for no or low cost (or which might request a donation):

1. Green Pet-Burial Society (<http://greenpetburial.org>) – an international organization that helps pet cemeteries adopt green burial procedures, and helps human cemeteries allow pet-burials in family plots.
2. Green Burial Council (<http://greenburialcouncil.org>) – the standard-bearer for green burials in the USA; they certify green cemeteries, products and providers.
3. Local Green Certification Program – check with your local government to see if there is a local green certification program. It is advisable to join a local network of green businesses. Such programs emphasize eco-friendly office procedures and materials (e.g., office equipment, energy usage, paper, cleaners and recycling protocols).

The Greening of Pet Cemeteries

People seek out pet cemeteries for a variety of reasons. What people like most about cemeteries is the sense of serenity, the plants, the sounds of birds chirping, and glimpses of squirrels scampering about. Yet some – who might have been potential customers – avoid contemporary pet cemeteries if they seek a natural, eco-friendly burial and setting.

Just as pet cemeteries – and the grief over a beloved pet – was once widely regarded as nonsensical, anything labeled ‘green’ was also regarded as being on the fringe. Today, however, ‘green’ is mainstream and often considered worthwhile. From a green burial perspective, we may ask:

- Why is placing a body into the earth consoling?
- Why do some find burial with only a shroud to be desirable, while others do not?
- What do pet-burials represent about our thoughts of pets as animals and as family members?
- How do pet-burials reflect our thoughts about a pet’s connection to nature?
- How do burials reflect our own connection to nature?

Concepts – What it means to go green

1. Some like the idea that nonbiodegradable caskets can protect the body from the elements – an extension of the sort of protection we bestow upon our pets during their lives. Yet decay still occurs. In fact, studies reveal that a body directly in the ground becomes less putrid than one sealed in a nonbiodegradable casket.
2. Currently, most people choose cremation upon the passing of a pet – it is convenient, conventional and relatively affordable. Those who choose a full-body burial make a commitment from a state of grief or out of respect for their loved one, rather than from a philosophical position. Yet one’s beliefs influence where and how a burial will occur.
3. For some, death brings the hope of resurrection. Those religious traditions that foster belief in *the resurrection of the dead* would support a green burial.
4. Green burial sections and cemeteries sustain whole ecosystems, and that wholeness is healing.
5. A green burial is a *living* memorial – the body continues to support life rather than preserve death within a plastic or metal container.
 - a. Many find inspiration in knowing – and seeing – healthy trees, shrubs, ferns and flowers that grow from a gravesite, providing food and shelter for wildlife, while purifying the air and water, and nourishing the soil.
 - b. In all these ways, a loved one’s remains are forever bound in the cycle of life.

Economics – Green burials are economically viable

1. Green burials open up new markets among those who embrace an environmental ethic, seek a *permanent* gravesite, or have limited funds.
2. Environmental responsibility demonstrates community allegiance, enhancing a pet cemetery's local profile.
3. Affordable burial options make a cemetery burial possible during times of personal hardship or periods of recession.
4. Green burials require very little cost for ground maintenance.
5. Creating art and landscaping that imitates natural beauty can be extremely costly. With green burials, such beauty can be attained at minimal cost to clients and cemetery owners.

Aesthetics – Living memorials are serene

1. Nature inspires the most beautiful, meaningful, and memorable works of art (e.g., drawings, paintings, sculptures, architecture, landscapes, urban design, poems, songs, novels).
2. Natural settings provide a calming effect, as well as endless interest in its subtle changes.
3. Wildlife – and the signs of wildlife (e.g., paw prints) – add to the beauty of a site.
4. Without harmful chemicals (e.g., fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides), wildlife can enjoy food and shelter in safety.
5. Burials that only use shrouds (without caskets) can maintain a level surface on a grave. The use of wood, wicker or paper caskets may lead to future depressions on the surface, yet these can easily be leveled with additional soil. Slight imperfections in a natural setting add to a site's charm.
6. A natural setting allows for appealing curved pathways throughout the site.
7. Cemetery policies might allow customers to:
 - a. Place hand-carved stones, locally quarried, as grave markers, or have no artificial marker.
 - b. Allow the placement of wildlife feeders or shelters on a gravesite (in cooperation with local environmental experts).
 - c. Use nontoxic, eco-friendly paints or dyes to decorate a casket (if a casket is chosen).
 - d. Install (temporary) works of art from surrounding natural materials.

Commemoration – Green burials can soothe people's grief and loneliness.

1. It is a return to something larger than ourselves.
2. We can honor deceased pets in ways that are wholesome and ancient.
3. We can connect with the healing forces in nature.
4. We can be comforted without distraction from poorly (or overly) maintained sites.
5. Permanency offers an immediate comfort, yet it is also an ethical issue – consumers want to know that a loved one's remains will not be disturbed, and can rest in peace.

For more information:

Visit the *Green Pet-Burial Society*

<http://GreenPetBurial.org>

info@GreenPetBurial.org