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Natural Burial for a Greener Afterlife

By Gemma Alexander

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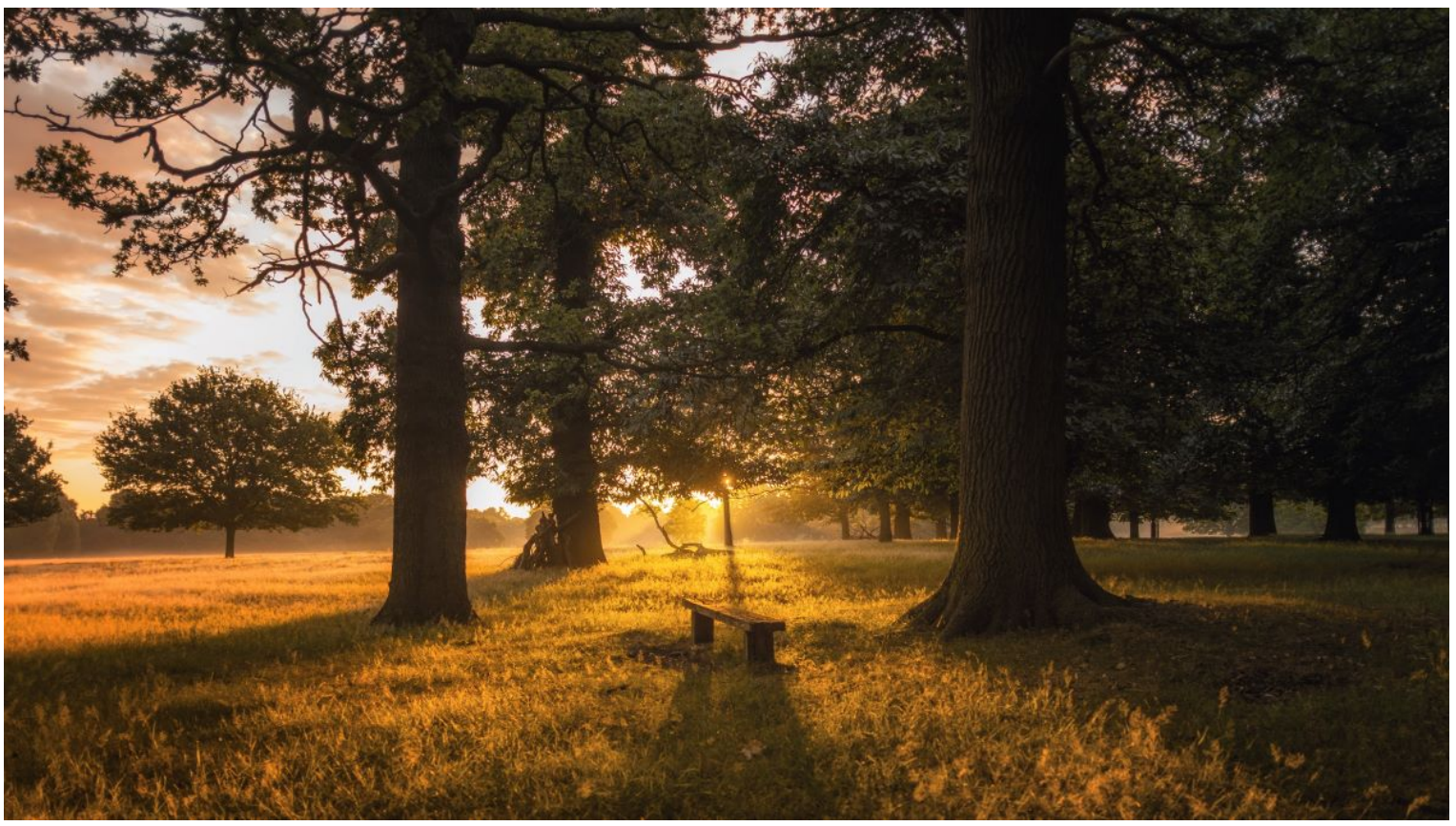
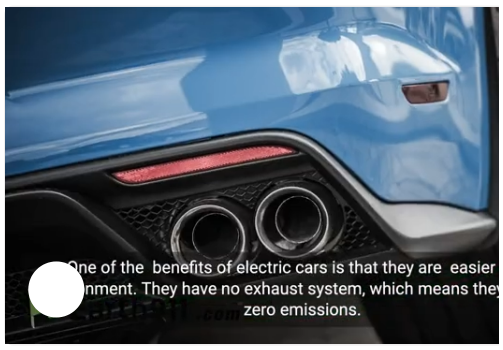


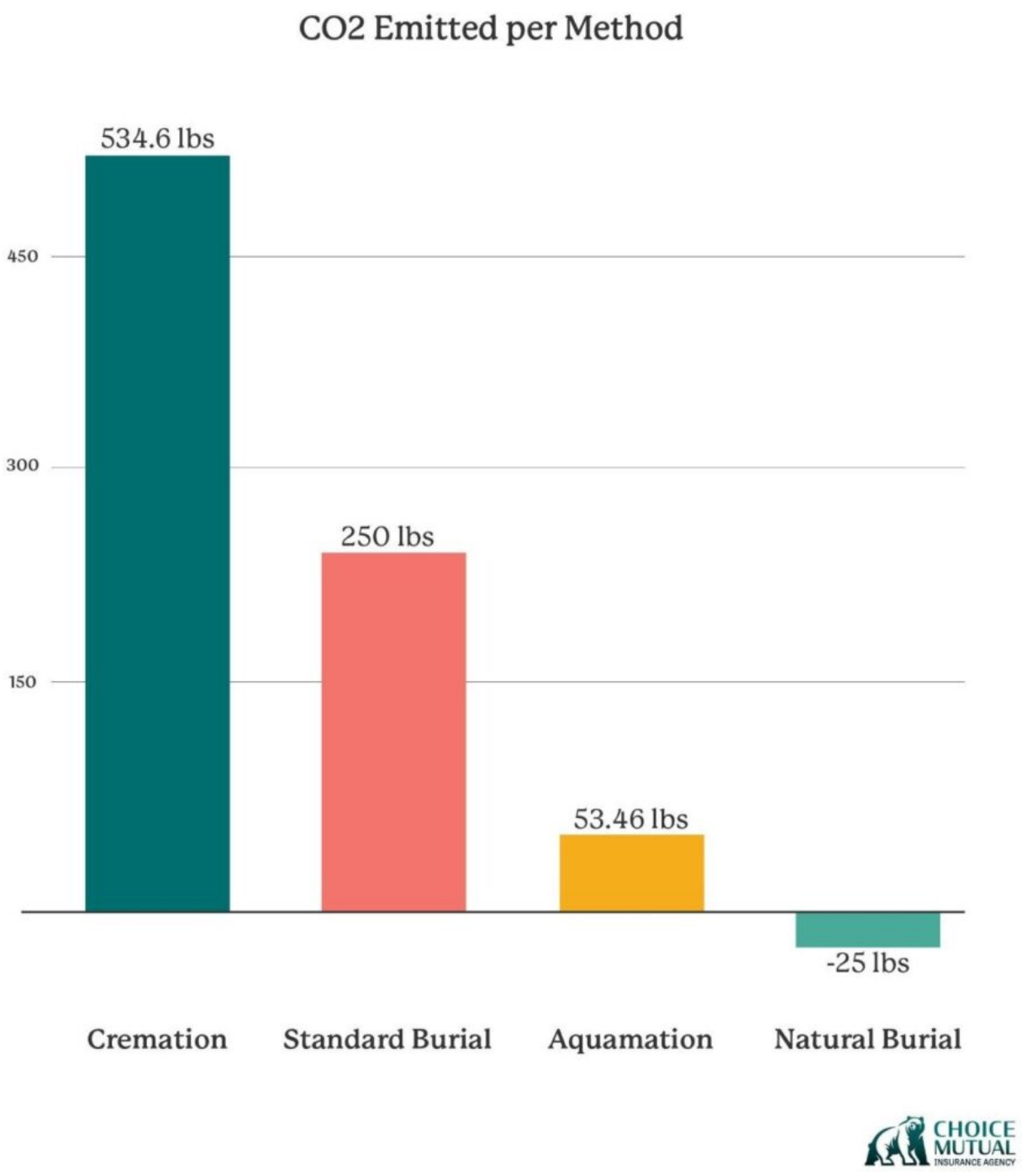
For most of human history, natural burial was the only option. Then, in the 20th century, toxin-laden embalming practices and air-polluting cremation methods became mainstream. Today, no matter how sustainably you have lived your life, modern funeral practices ensure that you make one last giant carbon footprint when you die. In many places, regulations require the use of toxic, persistent chemicals for embalming and concrete vaults for burial. But more and more individuals are looking for ways to die as sustainably as they have lived. And more states are legalizing ecological funeral practices. Green burial options are returning to the mainstream.

Modern Funeral Practices

Conventional modern burial practices are anything but sustainable. They use toxic, persistent chemicals for embalming. About 827,000 gallons of embalming fluid containing formaldehyde leak into soil and groundwater annually. Caskets



use the wood from four million square acres of forest each year. Burial vaults and monuments use more than 1.5 million tons of concrete; 104,000 tons of steel; and 2,700 tons of copper and bronze. All told, burials result in 178 tons of carbon dioxide emissions yearly. The Greenest State to Die In report estimates that the average burial generates 250 pounds of greenhouse gas emissions. The same study found that cremation generates more than 530 pounds of greenhouse gas emissions, due to the nonrenewable natural gas that powers crematoria.



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The environmental impact of dying varies by state, primarily based on whether burial or cremation is the more popular funeral choice. However, the availability of more sustainable alternative options can make a difference in how green your death can be. Until recently, most states' death care laws limited one's sustainable choices mostly to environmentally friendly uses for cremation ashes, like tree cremains urns and coral reef restoration. But natural burial is on the rise. According to the National Funeral Directors Association, interest in green burial options is up 5% since 2021, with 60% of Americans now open to green burial.

Green Burial

Natural burial, which is also called green burial, refers to a less toxic burial process. In a standard burial, the body is embalmed and put into a metal or lacquered wood casket that is then placed in a concrete burial vault. In a natural burial, the body receives no chemical treatment. It is wrapped in a cotton shroud or placed in a biodegradable casket made of wicker or wood, which is buried directly in the ground where it can naturally decompose.

Some people choose unobtrusive monuments made CLOSE m native stone that lie flat with the ground. Many natural cemeteries eliminate headstones entirely. Vegetation can completely cover the grave sites and the entire property remains indistinguishable from a natural area. (Individual burial sites are recorded using GPS coordinates so that they can be found.) The Greenest State study estimates natural burial to be climate positive, sequestering about 25 pounds of carbon.

Green Cemeteries

Green burial is legal in every state, however local cemetery regulations may limit the availability of places to perform natural burials. The New Hampshire Funeral Resources & Education website maintains a list of cemeteries that can accommodate natural burials. Cemeteries can take several approaches to natural burial. Conservation burial grounds go beyond natural burial and commit to using burial fees for land acquisition as part of a larger ecological preservation and restoration project. Natural burial grounds will preserve a natural or naturalistic landscape with native vegetation and will avoid pesticides and fertilizers. Hybrid cemeteries are regular cemeteries that have obtained legal authorization to perform natural burials in a special area or throughout the grounds but continue to offer standard burials with vaults as well.

Green Funerals

The Green Burial Council certifies funeral homes that meet seven main standards for green burial services. They maintain a list of certified funeral homes on their website. However, certification is not required to offer green burials. Many funeral homes that are not on the list can provide sustainable funeral services and green burials.

Funeral services can be made more sustainable by dressing the deceased in biodegradable clothing instead of synthetic fabrics; using recycled paper products; and offering locally grown, organic flowers and food. Families can ask guests to carpool and may choose to hold the service in a natural setting instead of a funeral home. Once common, few people know that home funerals

are still legal. Holding a home funeral allows families CLOSE care for the deceased and all aspects of the service and burial. In fact, families who live on large properties in rural areas may be able to perform their own natural burial at home. Most states allow burial on private property. Some states require designation of a piece of land as a family cemetery, and local zoning laws preclude burial in many areas.

Other Options

Some of the most environmentally friendly death care services don't even involve burial. Aquamation is a heated chemical reaction that leaves behind only bone fragments and a sterile liquid made up of salts, sugars, amino acids, and peptides in water. There are no residual tissues or DNA, so this liquid can be safely discharged as wastewater. Aquamation only generates about 53 pounds of greenhouse gases. Families can claim the bone fragments just as they can for cremains. The Cremation Association of North America maintains a map of regulatory changes that tracks the legalization of aquamation.

Composting, like natural burial, has the potential to be climate positive. However, the first state to legalize it only did so in 2019, so data is limited. Composting is catching on quickly, though, with new states passing laws allowing the practice each year. Human remains are composted individually in honeycomb-like cells (called "cradles" or "vessels"). These cells control the temperature and oxygen level inside. The slowly rotate a clean, efficient mixture of organic materials (including straw and wood chips). The final result is indistinguishable from garden topsoil. Families can choose to collect the soil for their own use, but most choose to donate it. From funeral to garden, the entire process takes about six weeks.

With the return of natural burials and with newer options like aquamation and composting, environmentalists finally have end-of-life choices that pay more than lip service to the idea of becoming one with nature.

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We Earthlings: More Green Spaces

By Gemma Alexander

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing here.

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