

one or their ashes are buried in a natural setting in a way in which their mortal remains are returned to the Earth as nutrients for plant growth. Memorial markers such as a special tree or an engraved wooden or stone marker that blend in with the natural landscape mark the final resting place.

### Keep it local

Source as many of the products for the burial as possible locally. By sourcing catering and flowers locally, a lot of pollution can be avoided. Also, a local burial will save on emissions for traveling to and from the burial by family members.

### Avoid waste

Avoid the use of (polystyrene) disposable materials and plastics for the ceremony and reduce the amount of left over food. Recycle any leftovers if possible.

### Sustainable cremation

Alternatives to burial, such as cremation have been practiced for thousands of years by Hindus and Buddhists. For many traditional Africans and African Christians the dividing line between life and death is blurred by the close involvement of family ancestors in the lives of the living. At this stage, they do not regard cremation as respectful treatment of the body which is important in ensuring a good relationship between the living and the dead.

Notwithstanding the concerns that some faiths have with cremation, the practice is growing. It is cheaper than burial. It is also encouraged by city authorities who need to balance land for cemeteries with other land use needs and deal with increasing levels of soil and ground water contamination from cemeteries. However, cremation does not get a bright green eco-funeral tick at present. Fossil fuel is used to incinerate bodies and apart from their CO2 emissions they also release air pollutants including mercury, dioxins and furans. Improving technology means that

crematoria will become more energy efficient in the future. They are also required to comply with the new air emissions health regulations by 2020.

Tips for greener cremations include:

- Choose a crematorium which meets the new air emissions regulations
- Choose a crematorium which uses gas and new incineration technology rather than diesel.
- Cremate your loved one in the simplest, most natural covering that the crematorium will allow to reduce the level of chemical emissions, e.g. a shroud or simple wooden or cardboard coffin.

Satapatha Brahmanas VII, 49“The world is green and delightful and God has made you a custodian over it (the world) and is observing carefully how you deal with it”

*Hadith from collection of Tirmidhi*

### MORE INFORMATION

Feel free to contact SAFCEI if you need more information about making a funeral more sustainable and for available alternatives.



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## Sustainable Funeral Rites

**How can funerals become more sustainable?**

“until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken: for dust you are, and to dust you will return.”

Genesis 3:19, Bible



## INTRODUCTION

**When we look at tradition, the graves of most people were simple and Earth friendly.**

People were typically buried within a day of their death, wrapped in a cloth shroud. Today, Muslim and Baha'i faith communities still bury their dead wrapped in cloth and the Jewish faith community use an unadorned wooden coffin. These simple burial wrappings acknowledge that in the eyes of God, we are all equal. Some faiths, including Hinduism and Buddhism, cremate their deceased and sprinkle the ashes on water—a lake, river or sea. By returning the mortal remains of loved ones in a simple way to the Earth, people were in tune with the natural cycles of life, death and renewal, which are part of God's earthly creation.



As society has modernised and urbanised, many of the burial rituals that family members once undertook together at home, are now done by commercial family homes. We are caught between health laws, a shortage of burial sites and the commercialisation of funerals. The comforting rituals of family members preparing the deceased's body together and of burying their loved one in a soft shroud or simple coffin have been replaced. We now let professionals preserve the bodies for us, using toxic preservation methods, including chemical embalming, and bury them in ornate and expensive caskets. These coffins are typically varnished, imported and lined with synthetic fabric and metal trimmings. They are often buried in graves with carved headstones and concrete borders, at a depth where decomposition is slow and the resulting nutrients are unavailable to plants.

## WHAT CAN WE DO TO BE SUSTAINABLE?

In South Africa, with our rich heritage of faiths and cultures, we have a wide variety of burial rites including cremation. A full body burial in a cemetery is however still the preferred option of the major faith groups.

### Sustainable burials

Cemeteries could be culturally significant spaces that also function as green lungs, especially in our cities. For cemeteries to function as valued community places, we need to return to a culture of natural burials, where our remains become part of Earth's nutrient cycle in a way that does not pollute the soil and water.

There are also things we can do ourselves to contribute to a more sustainable burial:

#### Avoid chemical embalming

Avoid chemical embalming of the body. Embalming chemicals such as formaldehyde (formalin) kill soil bacteria and long exposure to embalming fluids puts morticians at risk of cancer.

#### Natural cloth shroud

Bury the deceased in a natural cloth shroud or wrapped in cloth made of natural fibres. Local options are available in South Africa.

#### Coffin Materials

Use a locally made wooden coffin or 'wicker-type' coffin without varnish, synthetic cloth linings or metal hinges and metal or plastic trim. Apart from being eco-friendly, unvarnished natural

coffins provide the opportunity for the mourners to write blessing on the coffin. If desired, a cloth cover or pawl can be placed over the coffin and removed at burial. Local options for simple wooden coffins, wicker coffins and even sturdy cardboard coffins are available in South Africa.

#### Reuse a grave

Consider burial in a recycled grave i.e. a grave that is re-used in 10 to 20 years as is common practice in many European countries. This will require acceptance that the life force of the deceased no longer needs or inhabits the place where the body was buried. A small marker of natural local stone or wood or planting a tree would be an eco-friendly way of commemorating the memory of the departed rather than preserving an empty grave.

#### Eco-friendly grave markers

Use eco-friendly grave markers as described above to commemorate the memory of a loved one rather than a granite or marble headstone which was extracted from the Earth far away.

#### Real flowers

Use real, preferably locally grown indigenous flowers, herbs and plants rather than plastic ones which bleach in the sun and pollute the environment. Consider donating the price of the flowers to a local charity.

#### Green burial parks

Consider a green burial park such as Legacy Park on the outskirts of Cape Town. New green burial grounds are being developed country wide. In a green burial park either the body of a loved

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