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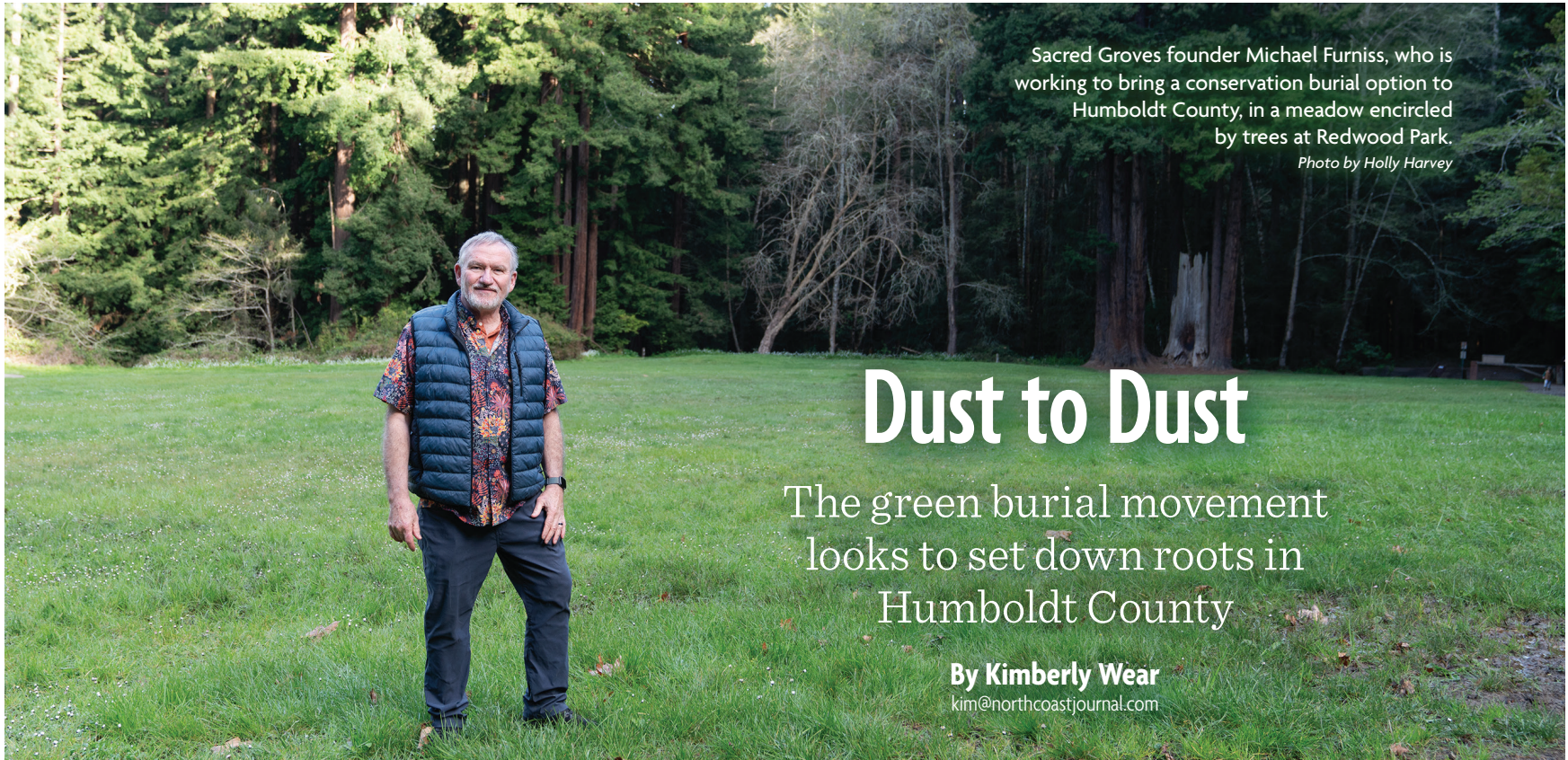
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## The Green Issue



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Sacred Groves founder Michael Furniss, who is working to bring a conservation burial option to Humboldt County, in a meadow encircled by trees at Redwood Park.  
Photo by Holly Harvey

# Dust to Dust

## The green burial movement looks to set down roots in Humboldt County

By Kimberly Wear  
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**A**rcata resident Michael Furniss traces his aspiration for a natural burial back to a rainy afternoon four decades ago when he was a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley studying soil science and forestry.

Watching swirls of water from the downpour absorb into the ground while sitting near a creek on campus, Furniss says he found himself thinking, “When my time comes, I’d like to be buried in the root zone of a giant Sequoia,” allowing his remains to enrich the soil and “ascend into a tree.”

In his 20s at the time, Furniss says he began exploring the idea of what he later trademarked as “entrement” — rather than an internment — but couldn’t find any options available that fit his vision.

Time passed and life marched forward, with Furniss going on to a career as a woodland soil scientist and international expert in climate vulnerability infrastructure assessments. Still, he says, that epiphany, “stuck with me and it’s been there ever since.”

After entering semi-retirement, the Cal Poly Humboldt adjunct professor in the Department of Forestry, Fire and Rangeland Management says he began turning his sights to providing what he had been looking for but unable to find all those years ago.

“That’s my origin story,” Furniss says. “That sort of set me on this trajectory.”

The essence of natural burial — or what’s now more commonly referred to as a green burial — is simple, a “dust to dust” approach of allowing the body’s organic materials to decompose naturally in the

soil and absorb into surrounding plant life, nourishing the local ecosystem.

Furniss says it’s not a new idea but one grounded in the burial practices from time immemorial that many cultures and religions continue to embrace around the world, with no embalming and the use of shrouds or other biodegradable materials, such as a simple pine or wicker casket, to enwrap the dead.

Along with giving talks on the subject and advocating for the city of Arcata to consider the development of a green burial site, Furniss also founded the organization Sacred Groves with the goal of creating a place where a person’s last act — like the one he envisioned for himself — can be one of giving back to nature.

The nonprofit, he says, is currently looking at a couple of locations in northern Humboldt County to establish conservation easements for that purpose and to preserve and restore those natural open spaces in perpetuity with the goal of using any extra funds from burial fees to expand that mission to additional sites.

Details are still being worked out, Furniss says, but he hopes to provide additional information about Sacred Groves’ effort soon.

Across the nation, the green burial movement has been taking root in recent years, with an increasing number of people wanting a more ecologically friendly option for their final resting place, one that forgoes conventional trappings, including the use of chemicals and caskets made from metal and hardwoods that are lowered into a cement vault — or what Furniss describes as a “box inside a box.”

“It’s a real trend,” he says of green burial, noting the practice first became available on the East Coast about 25 years ago after crossing over the Atlantic from England before coming west. “It’s not new but it’s a growing thing.”

According to a 2023 National Funeral Directors Association consumer awareness and preferences report, 60 percent of respondents said they were interested in “exploring green funeral options,” citing “potential environmental benefits” and “cost savings” among other reasons, up from 55.7 percent in 2021.

Even higher numbers were found during a May 2021 study by Kates-Boylston Publications, the purveyor of several funeral industry news magazines, with 91 percent of those surveyed expressing an interest in “environmentally friendly funerals and burials” and 84 percent indicating they would select a natural burial, given the option, compared to 43 percent just 13 years earlier.

The median cost for a conventional funeral with a casket and burial was roughly \$10,000 in 2023, according to the NFDA, while a funeral after a cremation, including a cremation container and urn was around \$6,200. Those estimates don’t include the price of a burial plot or internment, which can vary widely depending on the region and the cemetery.

Of the burial and funeral costs, embalming averages \$850 and a basic metal casket \$2,500, with a vault to encase the casket another \$1,700, according to NFDA,

Natural burials are generally less expensive, according to the Green Burial Council, mainly due to using a simple casket or shroud without a vault and foregoing em-

balming. But, as with a conventional burial, the cost of the plot itself depends on the burial site.

Funeral homes are often employed to prepare, store and transport the body using natural methods preceding a green burial, according to GBC, or the family may choose to undertake the process themselves.

According to Sacred Groves’ website, it has not yet set pricing but is “committed to affordability,” with the goal of charging “less than most other burial and spreading options.”

The availability of space, however, remains scarce.

As of December, the GBC estimates there are around 450 sites in the United States and Canada that accommodate green burials, with more continuing to be established.

Those, according to the GBC, take three main forms. There’s what’s known as a hybrid cemetery, which is a conventional cemetery that “offers the essential aspects of natural burial” — including not requiring vaults or liners inside the plot — and accepting “any kind of eco-friendly, biodegradable burial containers.”

Natural burial grounds are, like the name implies, “dedicated in full to sustainable practices,” with protocols to conserve energy and minimize waste. No chemicals, vaults or liners are allowed, while markers must be made of native stone and burial containers are required to be made from natural materials.

The third, conservation sites, are an extension of natural burial grounds, but “established in partnership with a conser-

vation organization” with a “conservation management plan that upholds best practices and provides perpetual protection of the land.”

The latter, Furniss says, is what Sacred Groves is looking to create in Humboldt, pointing to the work done by Billy and Kimberley Campbell in establishing the first conservation burial ground in the United States — which was also the first in the nation to provide any form of green burial — at the Ramsey Creek Preserve in Westminster, South Carolina.

According to the preserve’s website, the Campbells’ idea was simple — to provide burials immersed in nature in a way that allows people to leave a living legacy, with “a significant part of the interment expense” going toward “purchasing, restoring and maintaining the land and natural habitat for plants and animals.”

Originally started in 1998 with 33 acres, the sprawling property at the edge of the Appalachian Mountains is now twice that size, according to the website, accommodating 3 miles of hiking trails amid the preserve’s creekside, woodland, bog and meadow habitats that are home to more than 300 plants species and wildlife including deer, bobcats and black bear. The organization’s goal is to “permanently endow 1 million acres of wildlands over the coming decades.”

“More than merely financing protection, the inherently spiritual nature of our endeavor means that we can foster closer ties between human communities and the natural communities that they depend on,” the website states.

In a 2013 TED talk, Billy Campell, a practicing physician, says that if only a small portion of the nearly \$20 billion Americans spend annually on the funeral industry — an amount only projected to increase as the Baby Boomer generation becomes what he calls the “death boomers” — went to efforts like the Ramsey Creek Preserve, that 1-million-acre goal would be attainable in about 25 years.

Conservation burial grounds, Campbell notes, are “more than greener versions of contemporary cemeteries.”

“These are really significant natural areas where people can be buried,” says Campbell. “These are not cemeteries that accommodate a little bit of green. They are more for the living than for the dead. They are especially designed to be inviting places to hike, to have weddings, to bless babies, and just to have a good time while you are alive.”

The movement toward creating a more sustainable way of approaching burial, Campbell says, is “going to take more than money, it’s going to take a shift in culture and I think conservation burial could be a

tool in the tool kit to help move us toward sustainability.”

“We take modern conservation science and restoration ecology and design and create spaces that are not in the best definition cemeteries but multidimensional social and ecological spaces where the burials don’t overwhelm what is there,” Campbell continues.

Furniss says Sacred Groves aims for a similar concept to Ramsey Creek, one of providing a space for people to connect with nature in a meaningful way that honors those who have passed while celebrating the living. The idea, he says, is to create a place “your successors would enjoy visiting ... not just because you’re buried there but because it’s a cool place to go, to picnic or just to walk around and reflect.”

“We are also looking at creating the resources, tools and template for others to do this in other places,” Furniss continues. “We’d like to see this really take root and change the whole culture of burial in the U.S., so there’s kind of a loftier goal there.”

Prior to the 1860s, most burials in the United States would have fit the basic definition of natural. The practice of embalming, Furniss says, came about during the Civil War amid the need to return the bodies of soldiers killed during battle over long distances to their homes.

Other aspects of conventional burials, including the use of cement vaults or liners in the ground, developed over time, he says, mainly to prevent the ground above a grave from settling to ease maintenance in lawn-centric cemeteries.

“You’re not in the soil. You are in a buried mausoleum and that’s how the practice developed and a lot of people don’t want that,” Furniss says, noting that’s why other alternatives, including cremation, have become more popular over the years.

Furniss also notes he firmly believes “people should have it anyway they want it” and conventional burial is “not the enemy, it’s just there is an alternative.”

While many people shrink away from discussions about death and dying, Furniss says when he starts talking about the option of green burial, the response is often, “That sounds good to me. I want that.”

“People should talk about it,” he says. “It’s part of life.”

One of the questions that often comes up, Furniss says, is whether the process is environmentally safe. He emphasizes that unembalmed bodies are not toxic and will not contaminate groundwater at suitable sites, noting the soil is “an incredibly good filtering medium.”

“The soil is assimilating all the natural waste, the plants and the animals and whatever falls from the sky, and that’s what

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soils do and they are really good at it," he says, pointing to the concept of septic fields used to purify wastewater and farmers who have long been burying their dead animals in fields without a problem.

And he says the burials don't need to be 6-feet deep, noting there's no evidence of problems with odor issues or animals attempting to disturb green burial sites. In California, he notes, the minimum burial depth is 18 inches, or 12 inches in the case of a double burial.

People can be buried in the root zone of trees, he says, with the shallower the depth the better for the decomposition process because the soil's "biological activities are greatest at the top and then drop off quite quickly."

Also not needed are products like mushroom suits, or biodegradable burial wrappings made from mushroom spores, which may have helped promote the idea of natural decompositions but, he says, are "completely unnecessary for actually achieving that." Those exotic fungi are just going to be eaten by the local biota already in place in the soil, he says.

Furniss says one of the main issues with expanding green burial is the "huge gap between the supply and the demand," in part, because any land development proposal can be complex.

That, he says, is one of the reasons he's also approached the city of Arcata about exploring the feasibility of opening a green burial ground within city limits.

"It's a public service that Arcata doesn't provide," he says.

To that end, Furniss worked with a group of CPH students in an Environmental Science and Management Planning and Policy Practicum class who prepared a report in 2022 for the city that explored five potential sites for a green burial operation.

"After reviewing all of the materials and analysis, we feel like pursuing a green burial facility is a win-win project," the report's conclusion states. "It is better for the environment than other burial options, addresses concerns for the burial of the dead, allows for multiple uses on the site, and provides a potential perpetuating source of long-term revenue for the city of Arcata. "There is a lack of available space for housing the dead, and green burials are a beneficial alternative to conventional cemeteries as a solution. Arcata is a community with an aging population, a need for burial spaces and a desire for conservation. A green burial cemetery would meet the community's needs while also aligning with its general tendencies of favoring environmentalism. The operation of the cemetery would provide additional income to the city, and conservation burial grounds are inherently multi-use."

But any possibility of moving forward with an option in Arcata appears to be on hold for now. During an April 3 goal setting session, the City Council removed the consideration of green burial areas from the immediate goals list, according to City Manager Karen Diemer.

"While the city supports this concept, the council concurred that we have too many other priority projects this next year to devote staff time and resources to this project," Diemer wrote in an email to the *Journal*.

The Blue Lake Cemetery, which can be contacted through Eureka's Ocean View Cemetery, is listed as a hybrid cemetery on several green burial information sites and a person who answered the phone at the office this week stated green burials are being accepted.

But the closest natural or conservation burial options remain hours away, including The Forest in Ashland, Oregon, and Fernwood in Marin County.

Furniss says the hope is Sacred Groves will be available as a burial option in the next year or so and, like the Ramsey Creek Preserve, serve as a spot that "honors the dead while celebrating the living," with a specific focus on family memorial groves, where trees rather than headstones mark the burial sites, which would be tracked using GPS.

"The monuments are the trees," Furniss says. "It's more of a memorial woodland."

In addition to natural burials, he says, remains from cremation and other processes like aquamation — where bodies are broken down using water and alkali — and human composting will be accepted and pets can also be included in the family plots.

But more than a final resting place, Furniss envisions a setting where families gather to mark and celebrate major life milestones — from births and graduations to weddings.

"The idea is to make a place where people want to go and a place where people are fulfilled spiritually and visually," Furniss says.

He notes that a friend said to him, "Oh, you're trying to make death less sad." He says that's part of it, but it's also about "allowing people to have their final act to be something that helps rather than causes some impacts."

"Your remains will ascend into the trees and that's not immortality but it's nice," Furniss says.



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