



Natural Burial Policy and Conditions



Wanganui District Council policy

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Wanganui District Council

Natural Burial Policy 2011

1. Background

The Council, in 2006, was approached by a Natural Burials Group to investigate the provision of a natural burial cemetery in Wanganui. At the time the Council had received a few enquiries from the public as to whether this type of burial would be provided in the future. During this time the Council was planning to further extend the Aramoho cemetery as and when the present cemetery reaches capacity.

The Council resolved in 3 April 2006, that it provide a natural burial site within the Aramoho Cemetery Bombay Street extension when the land was developed and that a policy be prepared. A draft natural burial policy was developed and public consultation was undertaken with stakeholders and residents surrounding the Aramoho Cemetery. There was only a small interest by the public of this type of burial in 2006, and taking into account the changing trends of burials, and future development, the Council recommended that an area be developed in the extended Aramoho Cemetery when the new cemetery was developed. After consultation had been undertaken, the Council approved the Natural Burial Policy and that the policy is implemented when the new cemetery is developed as a cemetery extension.

In 2010, another area of the present cemetery had been identified as a site that can be developed as a natural burial at a minimal cost compared to the formal cemetery setting, and is more consistent with the natural space already present. Therefore the public do not need to wait for the planned cemetery extension to use this type of burial.

At the entrance of the natural burial site the community, through informative signage, will be informed that this type of burial is managed as a native area and visitors should expect presentation to be different from the other high presentation in conventional cemeteries.

2. Purpose

The purpose of the Natural Burials Policy is to provide an alternative way of laying people to rest in an environmentally friendly way.

3. Natural Burial Philosophy

The philosophy of a natural burial is low environment impact. It is to facilitate decomposition in such a way that human remains will naturally be part of nature again without harming the environment in the process. Accordingly prohibition of headstones, other memorials, artificial flowers and minimal vegetation reflect a natural state.

4. Goals and Objectives

The goals and objectives of the Wanganui District Council Natural Burial Policy are:

1. To provide people with the choice of an alternative burial
2. To reduce the impact of burial and cremations on the environment
3. To maintain the quality of the natural environment
4. To achieve rapid and real return of the body to the earth
5. To provide a more affordable alternative to conventional burials
6. To ensure low ongoing maintenance requirements.

- GOAL 1: To provide people with the choice of an alternative burial**
Objective: The deceased is lowered into the ground with a shroud or casket made of untreated sustainably material. Their unembalmed body will quickly return its nutrients to the earth. The family will assist to fill in the plot with warm rich soil and a native tree or flora is planted over the site.
- GOAL 2: To reduce the impact of burial and cremations on the environment**
Objective: There is no embalming of the body; rapid biodegradable non-pollutant caskets are used. Bodies are buried in the active soil layers, rather than the conventional 1.5m depth. The shallower depth helps to facilitate the breakdown of the body. This enables natural processes to take place, returning the body's nutrients to the ecosystem rapidly.
- GOAL 3: To maintain the quality of the natural environment**
Objective: A natural site is required. Graves will be laid out in the same way as a conventional cemetery, but the area is planted instead of plot memorials. Other flora is grown around the plot to create a natural setting. Graves are not re-used because the objective is to turn the land into a natural state; therefore there is no desire to re-use the plot.
- GOAL 4: To achieve rapid and real return of the body to the earth**
Objective: Being buried naturally means nature's own processes do their work, returning the body to the soil completely in only a matter of years. A Natural Burial cemetery in Wanganui would contribute to a sustainable environment for future generations.
- GOAL 5: To provide a more affordable alternative to conventional burials**
Objective: With cremation, bodies can take up to three hours to burn in a cremator, using up large quantities of fuels like diesel or gas. Natural burials will reduce energy costs, and thereby have a less impact on fuel resources. Such a cemetery would also reduce future pressure on traditional cemetery space as graves can be located closer together in a more informal layout.
- GOAL 6: To ensure low ongoing maintenance requirements**
Objective: A Natural Burial cemetery would reduce future pressure on traditional cemetery space and decrease the costs of providing the service. Far less maintenance is required for natural cemeteries because they reduce the need for operations such as mowing, headstone upkeep, and keeping plots manicured. A high level of service is required with traditional burials to keep the cemetery well manicured.

5. Council Policy and Legislative Context

The Natural Burials Policy covers the following requirements:

- Council 10-Year Plan Levels of Service
- Family Friendly Strategy 2008
- Burial and Cremations Act 1964
- Wanganui District Council By-Law Cemeteries 2008
- Resource Management Act 1991 and District Plan Provisions
- Health (Burial) Regulations 1946 and Cremation Regulations 1973
- Wanganui District Council Cemetery Monument Policy 2009

6. Monitoring and Evaluation

The policy will be reviewed with any changes to the Burial and Cremations Act 1964, and any other policy review undertaken by the Wanganui District Council annual review in July each year. Monitoring of the goals and objectives will be undertaken at the time of the policy review.

7. Appendices and references

The Natural Burial Conditions required to be undertaken for Natural Burials is attached to this policy, and forms part of the Wanganui District Council Natural Burial Policy 2011.



Natural Burial Conditions 2011

CONTENTS

Introduction	8
Natural Burial Philosophy	8
1.0 Acceptable Casket/Coffin/shroud/platform materials	8
2.0 Unacceptable Casket/Coffin materials	8
3.0 Burial Sites	9
4.0 Access rights.....	9
5.0 Costs	9
6.0 Burial Ground Location.....	9
7.0 Site Surrounds and Maintenance	9
8.0 Responsibilities of grave digging/casket lowering/filling of grave.....	10
9.0 Infectious diseases	10
10.0 Preparation of the Body	10
11.0 Memorials Monuments.....	10
12.0 Plot Markers	11
13.0 Disinterment	11

Introduction

The Natural Burial Conditions provide guidance for the implementation and management of the Natural Burial Policy. These conditions provide more details at an operational level and should be read in conjunction with the Wanganui District Council Natural Burial Policy 2011, the Wanganui District Council Cemeteries and Crematoria Bylaw 2008, and the Burial and Cremations Act 1964.

The conditions are for the operation of the Natural Burial Cemetery located at the Aramoho Cemetery, Wanganui, New Zealand.

Natural Burial Philosophy

The philosophy of a natural burial is low environment impact. It is to facilitate decomposition in such a way that human remains will naturally be part of nature again without harming the environment in the process. Accordingly prohibition of headstones, other memorials, artificial flowers and minimal vegetation reflect a natural state.

- No embalming to be used.
- No concrete vaults or grave liners of any kind.
- No artificial flowers, vases, statues, memorials or other manufactured decorations are allowed.
- Families may not create any paths to the grave site, or disturb surrounding landscape in any way. The ground is left in a natural state.
- Woollen shrouds with a solid base are acceptable. The solid base which assists lowering into the ground can be of natural timber and contained within the shroud.
- Plot markers - Only non-treated wooden markers may be used.
- Materials should decompose cleanly with no toxic residue entering soils and waterways following decomposition.
- The container holding the body should break down quickly enough to allow for oxygenation at shallow depth so the body decomposes cleanly.

1.0 Acceptable Casket/Coffin/shroud/platform materials

- 1.1 Caskets or platforms must be made using natural biodegradable materials with no toxic glues or finishes. For example materials such as wood, non-toxic ply; non-toxic cardboard, wool cotton, woven materials such as flax, bamboo, wicker or willow.
- 1.2 A casket must break down to allow for natural decomposition of the body at 1-1.5m depths.
- 1.3 Handles must be made of natural biodegradable materials with no toxic glues or finishes. For example materials such as wood or natural rope.
- 1.4 No lead, metal or plastic fixings may be used with the exception of steel screws and nails.
- 1.5 Casket linings and shrouds must be made of natural biodegradable materials with no toxic glues or finishes. For example materials such as wool or cotton.

2.0 Unacceptable Casket/Coffin materials

- 2.1 Cardboard caskets that have been treated with chemicals
- 2.2 Caskets with varnish, plastic fittings, glues or plastic sheeting inside casket.
- 2.3 Caskets leaking fluids
- 2.4 Caskets having an obnoxious smell
- 2.5 Treated varnish, non-biodegradable material inside or outside the casket.

3.0 Burial Sites

- 3.1 Burial sites are 1.5 metres in depth and 2.2 metres in length. These sites are ideal to protect the wilderness and diversity and allow Council plenty of room to determine the correct placement of the grave between existing landscape features.
- 3.2 Location of graves will be kept in “low tech” manner via the Council special grid system. The Council will provide GIS co-ordinates for each site to enable families to locate the plot.
- 3.3 The Council requires the following information for official cemetery records, prior to the burial:
 - a. Name of deceased
 - b. Age of deceased, including date of birth
 - c. Date of death and cause of death
 - d. Time and date of interment
 - e. If the deceased is not an adult,¹ the names of his or her parent(s) or legal guardian(s).
- 3.4 All plots will be allocated in sequence and particular sites cannot be chosen.
- 3.5 The grave will be backfilled with compost and top soil no less than one metre.
- 3.6 Graves may take many years to settle back to the original ground level and sometimes they will settle unevenly. All graves will be monitored over time for the best ecological “fit” for native plants and the local environment.
- 3.7 All graves will be monitored over time for the best ecological “fit” for native plants and the local environment.
- 3.8 Wanganui District Council employees assume no liability for damage, mental anguish, or loss caused by vandalism or other acts beyond its control.

4.0 Access rights

- 4.1 Visitors shall be respectful of all grave sites while walking around the natural area. Pets are not allowed in any part of Council cemeteries.

5.0 Costs

- 5.1 Comparatively, while the plots require a little more land plus plantings, ongoing costs are less due to a lower standard of maintenance.
- 5.2 The cost of burial includes native plants which will be planted on the gravesite, regular watering for the first year and to be monitored into the future.
- 5.3 The Council’s policy is to offer free burials for children under 15 years of age.

6.0 Burial Ground Location

- 6.1 A designated area will be provided for natural burials. This area will be located in the Aramoho Cemetery, Wanganui. A cemetery plan will be available from the office and indicates the location.

7.0 Site Surrounds and Maintenance

- 7.1 The Council may undertake selected thinning of and replacement of any native plants or trees and other plant material as appropriate.
- 7.2 Native seed or plant stock appropriate for the location is selected and supplied by the Wanganui District Council.

¹ Definition under aged 15 years
Wanganui District Council
Natural Burial Policy

- 7.3 Planting will be watered by cemetery staff for the first year and monitored and replanted if necessary. Families will not prune, “weed”, or otherwise harm native plants on or near the gravesite. Picking of native plants is prohibited.
- 7.4 Until the natives are established and visually appealing as a natural area appropriate maintenance of the site will be undertaken to ensure that the area does not look unappealing in contrast to the formal part of the cemetery. However, the different standard will be noticeable.
- 7.5 A sign will be erected outside the perimeter of the area stating that this portion of the cemetery will be left in a natural state.
- 7.6 The burial site is managed as a native planting area and visitors and grave owners should expect presentation and experience to be different to conventional cemeteries.

8.0 Responsibilities of grave digging/casket lowering/filling of grave

- 8.1 The digging of the graves will only be undertaken by cemetery staff.
- 8.2 The lowering of the body will only be undertaken by cemetery staff. The family may assist in consultation with the cemetery staff.
- 8.3 After lowering is complete, as soon as practicable the gravesite should be made safe by backfilling by the cemetery staff to minimise the risk of falls into the grave.
- 8.4 If a family wishes to help with backfill, it will only be under the supervision of the cemetery staff.
- 8.5 Family access to heavy plant is not permissible under any circumstances unless authorised by cemetery staff. Family will therefore have to hire a lowering device. The Funeral Homes will be able to assist families in this process.
- 8.6 If a body is to be lowered in a shroud then a board must be used on the lowering device. If the family is unsure on any issues associated with lowering a body wrapped in a shroud or other natural material into a grave, it is the family’s responsibility to contact the funeral home concerning lowering the body.

9.0 Infectious diseases

- 9.1 If a person dies from an infectious disease, the family must take advice from a funeral director; the funeral director must notify the medical Officer of Health (s.85 Health Act 1956) and take advice, and the Cemetery Sexton must be informed.
- 9.2 A person who has died of an infectious disease is to be buried in an eco-casket with appropriate protection against leakage.
- 9.3 A body must be disposed of within a reasonable time as set out in Section 46E of the Burial and Cremations Act 1964.

10.0 Preparation of the Body

- 10.1 If leaky fluids appear on the body shortly after death, guidance from a funeral home needs to be sought.
- 10.2 If at any time a family is unsure of any procedures to prepare the body for a natural burial, it is advised that the family contact a funeral home.

11.0 Memorials Monuments

- 11.1 No memorials are allowed on plots.
- 11.2 The cost and maintenance of any shrub or small tree is included in the plot purchase price.
- 11.3 A small shrub or small tree is planted at the time of burial in lieu of a headstone. The tree species will be determined by the Council. Once a section of six or so adjoining

plots have been subject to interments, in due course a larger species of tree will be planted to replace the individual shrubs.

- 11.4 Memorial plaques may be placed on the memorial wall by the cemetery office. These are supplied at an additional cost.

12.0 Plot Markers

- 12.1 A wooden grave marker may be installed at the head of the plot, at the time of burial.
- 12.2 One untreated wooden marker per burial plot may be placed on the plot at the time or within the first week of the funeral service. The marker shall be no longer than 150mm x 100mm in size x 250mm high above ground level. The marker shall be attached to an untreated timber stem of maximum size 100mm x 100mm that can be pushed into the soil and is to be centrally located at the head of the plot.

13.0 Disinterment

Disinterment is **discouraged** for three reasons:

- 13.1 After some years, it is unlikely that much or anything remains of bodies to recover and move.
- 13.2 It will require trees to be uprooted to access and dig the plot, setting back the restoration process.
- 13.3 The wishes of the deceased to be buried at this specific type of cemetery should be respected.
- 13.4 If the Council receives an application for a disinterment, the disinterment shall be conducted pursuant to Sections 51 and 55 of the Burial and Cremations Act 1964.

Aramoho Cemetery Map

APPENDIX 1

Site A is the new formal cemetery planned

Site B is the recommended Natural Burial site

