

Why Diane honoured her husband Michael's death with a natural burial

By [Dinah Lewis Boucher](#)

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Diane Hart says it's good to start the conversation around death and dying before it happens. The Hart family in Pittwater, Sydney, 1980. (*Supplied*)

Michael Hart was a child of the woods, says the woman who knew him best: his wife and partner of 54 years, Diane.

"Rupert Bear was his alter ego. He was the boy who never grew up with his grandkids, the natural world was his happy place," Diane says.

After he died, Michael was not embalmed, his body instead was bathed by his son and dressed in a favourite outfit.

His coffin was not plastic lined, instead made of simple cardboard with rope handles — all materials that were biodegradable.

The funeral procession followed the hearse on foot from the family home to the nearby Mullumbimby cemetery as music bellowed from the car.

And, when it was time, his body was placed into the earth just 1 metre deep — 3.3 feet — while the service was held by the Hart's family friend: their neighbour.

Diane — who comes from a background in environmental science — had been working for a couple of years establishing the first natural burial ground in the Byron Shire when Michael was diagnosed with cancer.

"Like me, Michael wanted how he ended up to be part of the solution and not the problem," she says.

"Unfortunately, he didn't stay with us long enough to see it come to fruition, but we were able to have a very personal green burial for him at Mullumbimby cemetery.

"Everyone can organise their own funeral, if they want to. You can make it cheaper,

greener and more personal," Diane says.

What is a 'natural burial'?

A natural burial is a resting place generally in a bushland or regenerated area, no toxic materials are used, including for the coffin, memorial stone or items buried with the body.

Natural Death Advocacy Network (NDAN) president Bec Lyons says it encourages the nutrients in a body to return to the earth in the most environmentally friendly way possible.

The network advocates for natural burials, the practice of burying a human body in the earth in a manner that allows for natural decomposition with minimal impact on the surrounding ecosystem.

Bec says the overall [environmental impact of conventional burial and cremation](#) are "about the same", with conventional burial consuming urban land, "polluting the soil", along with the use of "resource-intensive manufacture and transport of caskets, headstones and grave liners".

As for a shallow-depth grave, she says the deeper you lay a deceased body in the earth, the slower the decomposition and the less the earth receives the nutrients from the remains.

"A shallow-depth grave allows for a much faster decomposition, due to warmer soil, aeration and oxygen flow. It also ensures the release of minimal methane emissions, especially when compared to the atmospheric pollution of flame cremation," she explains.



The couple on their honeymoon, 1972. (Supplied)

With a natural burial, there is:

- Only one body per burial plot
- No embalming chemicals
- What the body is dressed in needs to be biodegradable
- Compost and other green matter are added to the grave
- Ideally, natural burial is also a shroud burial. You don't need to have a coffin to be buried in a grave (although in some states it will be required for transport to the grave)
- A natural burial site would look like any park or bushland, with no statues or tombstones



The concept of a natural burial ground is that it remains a natural environment, you won't know you're in a cemetery. (Supplied: Lismore Bushland Cemetery)

"The point of natural burial is that it's not just environmentally friendly, but [that] it actually [also] adds value to the earth. The grave site is allowed to return to nature."

While natural burial is now available across Australia in existing cemeteries, Lismore City Council was the first to offer this option in 2008.

Bec says a growing number of councils are opting to offer "green burials" within its existing cemeteries, although the number of wholly devoted natural burial grounds in Australia — such as the one in the Byron Shire, is still low.

"At present, we don't have a functioning, dedicated, natural burial site operating as a stand-alone ground, but they are in development ... Such as the one in Byron Bay, another one on the South Coast of NSW in Bodalla, one in South Australia and one in Victoria," Bec explains.



Diane at the first approved natural burial ground in the Byron shire, Northern NSW. *(Supplied)*

After three years of working towards establishing the natural burial ground in Mullumbimby, Diane says, the land and approvals are in place.

The site is on council-owned land — a 5-hectare degraded paddock that Diane describes as ideal, with views through the valleys to Gondwana rainforest, Mt Chincogan and the Brunswick River.

"It will be a nature conservation area in perpetuity, so forever," she says.

Creating your own ceremony

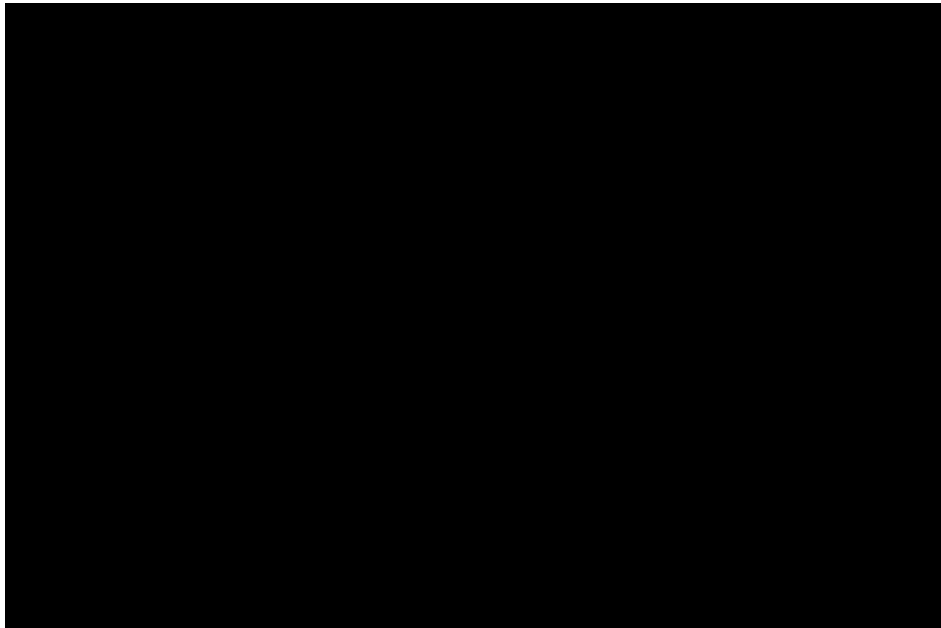
As much as you can intellectually know about something, nothing prepares you for loss. Helpful advice Diane received from a close friend after Michael's death was to give him a meaningful send-off.

"Because," Diane explains, "this is what would sustain us during the dark times that were to follow — and how right that was.

"Before he died, I had no idea people lived with this kind of pain. I realise now I lived a charmed life."

It's good to start the conversation around death and dying before it happens, she says, because "perhaps every love story is a grief story in waiting".

An aerial image of Byron Shire's first natural burial ground in Mullumbimby. *(Supplied)*



Michael Hart was a fit 72-year-old when he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Ensuring he had a meaningful send-off has helped alleviate Diane's overwhelming grief. *(Supplied)*

Diane says it's about completing the cycle of life and returning from where we came.

"We are just the stuff of stars. Particles of the universe waiting to return.

"He may be dead, but Michael is still alive to me. I don't believe I will ever get used to this. But I hope I will get better at it."