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Green burials are gaining traction in the Washington area

By Rachel Saslow, Published: June 6, 2011

Live eco-conscious, die eco-conscious. People who drive hybrid cars, recycle, compost and eat vegetarian are showing increased interest in leaving this world in an equally Earth-friendly way: a green burial.

“Baby boomers who define themselves as environmentalists don’t want to go out with a final act of pollution,” says Joe Sehee, executive director of the Green Burial Council, headquartered in Santa Fe, N.M. “A lot of people find solace in returning to the earth naturally.”



(Katherine Frey/THE WASHINGTON POST) - Carol Fox holds a duplicate of the plaque that adorns her son's Eternal Reef off the coast of Ocean City.

(Carol Fox/CAROL FOX) - Jamie Fox was studying environmental/marine science and philosophy at Salisbury University when he drowned while boogie boarding.

A range of burial options are considered green. People can forgo embalming or request nontoxic embalming fluid; buy a biodegradable container made from sustainable willow, wicker or bamboo, or even order up a simple shroud. The burial can take place on “natural burial grounds” where people are buried without markers on protected wildlife preserves. There’s even a company that incorporates cremated remains into a “reef ball” that provides habitat for fish.



Carol Fox of Mount Airy, Md., chose a green burial at sea for her son, Jamie, who died at age 21 in 2002.

Jamie was studying environmental/marine science and philosophy at Salisbury University on Maryland’s Eastern Shore when he drowned while boogie boarding in the ocean. Fox says he loved scuba diving and was the type of person who always picked up trash while walking on the beach. She was searching online for a dolphin-themed urn for her son’s

cremated remains when she stumbled upon the Web site of the Decatur, Ga.-based [Eternal Reefs](#).

“I thought, ‘Oh my gosh, this is just what Jamie would have wanted,’ ” she says.

In 2004, Fox says, Jamie became the first person buried in a reef ball in Maryland, in the waters off Ocean City, “where he lived and loved.”

To make a reef ball, cremated remains are mixed with concrete and shaped into a basketball-size “pearl” that weighs about 60 pounds. The pearl is affixed to a beehive-shaped concrete reef that weighs 650 to 4,000 pounds. Memorial reefs, which cost from \$3,995 to \$6,995, can accommodate up to four members of a family; there is also a community-reef option, with pearls from multiple families, that cost \$2,995 per person. Eternal Reef has installed about 60 reef balls in the Chesapeake Bay, including seven that were placed there in a ceremony in April, according to George Frankel, the chief executive of Eternal Reefs.

Fox plans to scuba-dive to her son’s grave in July, when he would have turned 30. She hopes that it’s teeming with fish and plant life.

“This is giving back and helping rebuild the reef,” Fox says. “It’s something you can see.”

Dust to dust

Eighty percent of people interested in green burials were originally planning a cremation, according to the Green Burial Council’s Sehee. Cremation releases pollutants into the air such as nitrous oxide and mercury from dental fillings, though the threat from these toxins has been “a little exaggerated,” he says. Crematories are not regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Nearly 40 percent of deceased people in the United States are cremated. The popularity of the practice varies greatly from state to state, from 74 percent of those who die in Nevada to 12 percent in Mississippi, according to the Cremation Association of North America.

Environmental concerns about traditional burials include the use of water, pesticides and pollution-producing lawn mowers at cemeteries. Also, extended exposure to the formaldehyde in embalming fluids raises a mortician’s risk for dying of myeloid leukemia, according to a [2009 study in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute](#).

Plus, there’s the idea of taking up a plot of land for eternity, land that the deceased aren’t exactly enriching. Sehee has calculated that Americans bury about 1 million tons of steel in caskets every year — enough to build another Golden Gate Bridge. And the amount of

concrete used to make the vaults commonly built to house the caskets could build a two-lane highway from New York to Detroit, he says. Caskets are sometimes manufactured abroad and need to be shipped here, increasing a person's posthumous carbon footprint.

The average American burial cost \$6,560 in 2009, according to the National Funeral Directors Association; burials are a rare product where consumers may save some money by opting for a green option. A green burial can cost about half what a traditional one does because families don't have to pay for embalming and body preparation, a headstone or an expensive casket.

The mid-Atlantic has been slow to catch on to the idea of green burials, which has been a hot topic in the funeral industry for almost a decade.

"You're not sitting in one of the hot spots for green burials," Sehee says about Washington. It is most popular on the West Coast and least popular in the South, he says.

Some think green burials are mostly hype.

"There's an industry joke that more people attend green burial seminars than get buried green," says Mark Matthews, president of the Cremation Association of North America.

'A part of nature'

Congressional Cemetery in Southeast Washington has been offering green burials for a year. Manager Alan Davis says it has been "a slow-going process," but he hasn't advertised the new practice anywhere other than on his institution's Web site.

Walk to the southern tip of Congressional's 33¹ / ₂ acres — past the graves of longtime FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, more than 90 members of Congress and a vice president — to reach the designated green burial area. According to Davis, the cemetery has pre-sold two plots in this area. Congressional did three green burials in the cemetery last year, before Davis decided to designate the special section. Green plots and standard plots at Congressional cost roughly the same amount.

The area will accommodate about 75 graves, which will be gridded out in the Washington-standard 8-by-3-foot plots. Only one person will be buried in each space, as opposed to the

five interments per grave that are allowed in the rest of the cemetery (two burials, one on top of the other, plus three urns, one at the head, middle and foot). Green graves are “designed to collapse,” Davis says, and need to be continually filled in with extra dirt; the ground is too unstable for multiple interments.

(Animals — especially the dogs that are allowed in Congressional for off-leash walks — are not able to dig down to the bodies because they would have to get through “several tons of dirt,” Davis says.)

Because there aren’t any headstones in the green burial area, a map of where people are interred is kept in the office. Davis is still deciding how he wants to commemorate the folks buried there: Ideas include engraving the names into a large boulder or a plaque.

“This cemetery is a pre-Civil War cemetery, started in 1807, so we practiced what has now come to be known as ‘green burials’ years and years and years ago,” Davis says.

Modern embalming hadn’t even been invented in 1807; it became common during the Civil War when soldiers died far from home and their families wanted their loved ones brought back. To keep the soil free of any leached chemicals, Davis says, bodies in the green burial area cannot be embalmed.

The concrete vaults that Davis requires in the traditional part of the cemetery to prevent the ground from caving in were not common until the middle of the 20th century. Vaults are not allowed in the green burial area, but caskets are required — no shroud-only burials. The biodegradable caskets must be free of chemical resins that can leach into the ground.

“A lot of traditional funeral practices provide a way for the body to be protected from the elements rather than become a part of nature,” Sehee says. “Green burials flip that around.”