

Debate

The Growing Popularity of Green Funerals

ISSUE: Are green funeral companies meeting the needs of environmentally-conscious consumers, or does the industry need more regulation?

A growing number of funeral companies are meeting people's desires to be green—even in death. The \$12 billion funeral industry faces several environmental issues, including that many areas are beginning to run low on land that can be used for burials. In the United Kingdom, several places could run out of space within the next ten years. Germany and Sweden reuse grave sites after 25 years, which might be a feasible solution, but that practice has led to complaints regarding human dignity. And while people can opt to be cremated, an Australian study determined that cremations emit approximately 160 kilograms of carbon-dioxide per body. With these concerns in mind, consumers worldwide have begun to look toward green burials. In one survey, 43 percent of respondents indicated a willingness to consider a green burial. Green burials conserve our natural resources, limit carbon emissions, protect employee health, and preserve the natural environment.

Green burials take many different forms, from the use of a biodegradable casket to high-tech procedures that compost the remains. Many green burials avoid preserving the body with formaldehydes, as the chemical may cause ground contamination and prolongs the decomposition process. Others forgo tombstones, instead marking the gravesite with trees or flowers. Other companies are taking green funerals to new levels. For instance, U.K. funeral company Creative Coffins creates themed biodegradable coffins, while Creative Reefs mixes human ashes with cement to help create an artificial reef ball placed on the ocean floor.

Many consumers support green burials as a way to reduce pollution and preserve land availability, and funeral homes are capitalizing on the opportunity. In the United States, nearly 300 funeral homes in 40 states offer eco-friendly funeral services. Because Muslims, Jews, Wiccans, and other groups prefer not bury their dead in caskets, simple biodegradable coffins and shrouds could appeal to this target market. Additionally, green burials are often less expensive than traditional burials. The National Funeral Directors Association estimates the average cost of funeral services is \$6,500, excluding the grave plot, tombstone, and additional items. Consumers also like the idea of contributing to the environment after death. For instance, the reef balls from Creative Reefs help replenish reefs destroyed by pollution.

On the other hand, expanding too quickly could lead to unscrupulous companies taking advantage of grieving families. The lack of regulation for this emerging industry could therefore be problematic. For instance, one woman recalls how her father's grave was not sufficiently marked in any way, which created uncertainty as to where he had been buried. Consumers who are used to traditional funerals may be unprepared for what a green burial process entails. For example, mourners cannot often view the body before burial if the body has not been embalmed. The health implications of natural burials have also become a concern. Residents in one Georgia county feared that unboxed bodies could contaminate the local water supply or be dug up by animals. Proponents of green burials say these claims are groundless, but the county commissioners passed a law mandating that bodies be placed in leak-proof coffins.

Other potential issues involve questionable green burial practices. The Health Department of Ohio stopped one funeral home's practice of liquefying human remains because some residents feared that the process was akin to having their loved ones "flushed down the toilet." (This practice is legal in other states, and while liquid remains are sent to a water treatment facility, bone ash is given back to the relatives.) Burying pets in the same area as humans have also occurred in eco-friendly cemeteries.

Determining whether a process is truly green is another issue that has plagued the green industry as a whole. Since there are not yet clear guidelines, it is possible that companies in the funeral industry might make their processes appear greener than they really are.

There are two sides to every issue:

1. Green burials meet the needs of environmentally-conscious consumers and alleviate concerns about pollution, land use, and high funerary costs.
 2. Green burials require additional research and regulations to prevent greenwashing, health threats, and misconduct against emotionally vulnerable consumers.
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