



10 Minutes for the Planet
Returning to Earth: a Green Burial ©
by Sarah Heath

Hello! I'm Sarah Heath and you're listening to 10 Minutes for the Planet on EnglishWaves. A frequently asked philosophical question is – what happens when I die? One certainty is very apparent: our bodies need to be disposed of when we do pass on. In terms of the options available today, the most usual funeral arrangements are traditional burials or cremations. However, both of these options prove to have a detrimental impact on the environment particularly when taking into consideration that, worldwide, 150,000 people die every day.

So, what are the effects these daily rituals and ceremonies have on the environment? A traditional burial involves invasive and ongoing land usage, unnecessary products such as ornate coffins and tombstones and frequently overly-manicured graveyards to name but a few negative points. Environmental groups in the United States have calculated that 800,000 tons of formaldehyde-based product are used in cemeteries each year and that for every ten acres of cemetery, there is roughly 1,000 tons of steel used in coffins, 20,000 tons of concrete for the construction of vaults and almost the equivalent amount of wood used for coffins as needed to build forty houses. Whatever the afterlife brings, is this a necessary part of it?

Cremation has a lower ecological impact than a traditional burial but the emissions released, including traces of mercury, nevertheless contribute to air pollution during the incineration process. To fully incinerate a human body, a furnace must be fully burning for over an hour at 800 degrees – a huge use of fuel and the double impact of the subsequent releasing of greenhouse gases.

As society is being made aware of the destruction to the environment through these funeral options, environmentally sustainable alternatives are being made available for a more ethical choice.

Bio-degradable coffins have become far more commonplace and can be made from a variety of materials: banana leaf, cane, bamboo and even wool. Companies which provide such caskets can usually also trace back the materials to sustainable sources. Reputable providers also ensure that all fittings and screws are also completely biodegradable. An alternative to mahogany, which frequently comes from endangered rainforested areas, coffins can be also made from waste or recycled wood. One, perhaps slightly morbid

designer, has come up with the concept, Shelves for Life, a shelving unit which converts into a coffin when the intended moment arises!

A final resting place which ultimately also benefits the surrounding countryside is also becoming a more popular preference. Natural woodland burial grounds are now more readily available and are clearly more eco-friendly than cemeteries, particularly when linked to a contribution to conservation causes through financial savings made by 'going natural'. One study calculated that if 45% of Americans chose to have one of these 'conservation burials', it could generate over €3 billion in revenue towards conservation projects each year. The New Scientist magazine compared that sum to the annual amount needed to help combat the extinction risk of endangered species – a figure of around €4 billion.

And for those who love the sea, there is the opportunity to help marine life by having your ashes mixed with environmentally-safe cement to produce an artificial coral reef which can support underwater plant and animal life. These 'eternal reef' memorials can be personalised by family and friends before being placed into the sea.

Other eco-friendly choices can be made in the form of green urns whereby the ashes of a loved one are placed inside along with a seed to grow a tree. These biodegradable urns made from materials such as coconut shells, are planted and eventually the urn biodegrades and the seed germinates. The beginning of a new life after death.

What better legacy to leave planet Earth once we have gone than helping continue the circle of life? Leaving as tiny a trace of ourselves as possible when we come to our journey's end and instead...turning into a tree or a coral reef?

Tune in next week for more stories on the environment, here o