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10 Minutes For The Planet

Returning to earth: a green burial ©

by Robert Shepherd and Catherine Balter-Kendall

Stressed syllables are underlined and in **bold**.*

Hello, you're listening to EnglishWaves and this is Robert Shepherd.

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 **fu**neral arrangements are tra**di**tional **burials** or cre**ma**tions. However, both of these options prove to have a detri**men**tal impact on the environment particularly when taking into consideration that, worldwide, 150,000 people die every day.

So, what are the effects these daily **ri**tuals 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. Environ**men**tal 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 con**struc**tion 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 e**mis**sions released, including traces of mercury, nevertheless contribute to air pollution during the incine**rat**ion 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 de**struc**tion 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

to pass on (n.) to die

burial (n.) ceremony of putting a body in the ground after death

ongoing (adj.) continuing

ornate (adj.) highly decorated

coffin (n.) a long box in which body is buried

graveyard (n.) a burial ground

to name a few (exp.) to give just some examples

steel (n.) a strong metal used in construction

vault (n.) a chamber used for one or several family burials

environmentally sustainable (exp.) that do not harm the environment, ecological

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 on English Waves.

casket (n.) a coffin

provider (n.) a manufacturer

fittings (n.) the small parts attached to furniture

screw (n.) a sharp pointed metal pin with a thread used for joining things together

mahogany (n.) reddish-brown wood from a tropical tree

to come up with (phrasal vb.) to invent

eco-friendly (adj.) ecological

sum (n.) amount of money

figure (n.) number

ashes (n.) powdery residue left after burning sth.

seed (n.) very small hard part of plant from which a new plant grows

legacy (n.) sth. left behind by a predecessor

***Tip!**

The -al in the following words is pronounced like the final -le of “able” or “bottle”:

funeral, tra**di**tional, **ri**tual, **bu**rial, ma**te**rial, **fi**nal, **na**tural, **a**nimal

The “t” and “s” in -tion and -sion in the following words are pronounced “sh” as in “sugar”

cre**mat**ions, con**struc**tion, e**mi**ssion, incine**ra**tion, de**struc**tion, contri**bu**tion, conser**va**tion,

Note that in words ending in -tion or -sion the stress falls on the penultimate syllable.