

Laid to rest in "green" cloak

Natural-burial advocates say practice saves resources while conserving land

By Joey Bunch

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Coloradans may get a chance to stand up for the environment, even when they're 6 feet under.

The national Green Burial Council advocates a plan that allows the dead to be buried naturally - no embalming, no casket, no steel vault, nothing that can't return to dust - thus conserving land.

Only a dozen designated green cemeteries exist in five states, but a site in Gunnison County is being reviewed, said Joe Sehee, president of the nonprofit organization.

Sehee will discuss the concept today during the National Land Conservation Conference in Denver.

"Once someone is buried there, it's consecrated land," Sehee said. "It can never be developed."

The average burial cost in a green cemetery is \$4,000, with half used as a tax-deductible donation to buy up land around the site.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, 2.4 million Americans die each year.

Traditional funeral costs vary, but a casket alone can run \$8,000, according to the Casket & Funeral Supply Association of America.

George Russell operates a green cemetery in Texas, with two more nearby in the planning process to help preserve land east of Huntsville, Texas, in oak and pine forests on the shores of Lake Livingston. Prices start at \$300.

"I'm not making a dime off burying people," he said this week. He's continuing a fight his mother, the late noted conservationist Marjorie Russell, started to keep land away from developers or power companies.

"I see people (needlessly) spend thousands of dollars pickling their loved ones and creating environmental wastelands," he said of graveyards.

According to figures collected from several sources by the Green Building Council, traditional burial in the United States each year leaves behind 827,060 gallons of embalming fluid, 90,272 tons of steel and 2,700 tons of copper and bronze from caskets, and 1.6 million tons of concrete vaults.

Caskets are not required for burial in any state, although some cemeteries make it a requirement. Embalming is required only when a body is transported across state lines, according to the Green Burial Council.

Carol Lynn Green, the National Funeral Directors Association's environmental lawyer, says embalming fluid "breaks down readily."

"We've never seen any well-founded scientific studies that have determined formaldehyde causes any problems in the environment."

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Though people can spread their loved ones' ashes for free in most public parks or shorelines, there is an "ick" factor when a passer-by finds a shard of bone or experiences a breeze full of ashes, Sehee said.

The connection between the land and preservation sells conservation burials, he said

"A lot of people are attracted to the idea that their loved one's last act is a legacy," he said.

Natural burial or cremation was the norm for centuries in most civilizations.

"Jesus was buried in a shroud, in a perfectly natural way," said Sehee, a former Jesuit lay minister. "'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust' was not pulled out of thin air."

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