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Green burials about returning to nature

By **L.A. Lorek** - Express-News

From "ashes to ashes and dust to dust," the green burial movement in the U.S. wants to take people back to nature.

The options for green burial in the United States are expanding — from cremated ashes crafted into "reef balls" to natural cemeteries. In Texas, you can serve as your own funeral director, and there is a natural cemetery in Huntsville.

As the baby boomer generation "slouches into retirement," they are bringing environmental consciousness and a do-it-yourself mentality to bear on end-of-life issues, said Mark Harris, author of "Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial."

"On some basic level, green burial acknowledges that the natural end of all life is decomposition and decay," Harris said. "Instead of fighting it at literally all costs with chemical embalming, concrete vaults and bulletproof metal caskets, green burial says, 'Let's just let the natural process play itself out.'"

Today's cemeteries act as "de facto landfills of nonbiodegradable materials," Harris said. Embalming solutions contain formaldehyde, which is toxic, he said. It is a "human carcinogen, and because of its potentially toxic effect when released into the environment, the Environmental Protection Agency regulates it as a hazardous waste," according to "Grave Matters."

"A typical 10-acre cemetery contains enough coffin wood to construct more than 40 homes, nearly 1,000 tons of casket metal and another 20,000 tons of vault concrete," Harris said. "Add to that enough toxic embalming fluid to fill a small backyard swimming pool."

And from the consumer standpoint, green burials can save money.

The average cost of a traditional funeral with a vault is \$7,323, not including burial costs, according to the National Funeral Directors Association. Burial plots and other expenses can push funeral costs to \$10,000 or more.

Green burials range in price from almost nothing to cremation with an average cost of \$1,800; to special reef balls, which can run several thousand dollars; or burial at the natural cemetery, ranging from a few hundred dollars to \$5,000, Harris said. An average casket costs \$2,300, but people can buy a plain pine box for a couple of hundred dollars, he said. Or they can buy fancier biomass coffins made from bamboo, sea grass, wicker or formaldehyde-free plywood, he said.

The United States and Canada are the only countries in the world that routinely embalm dead people, Harris said. "In Europe, cremation is very popular," he said. "In the U.S., cremation is rising."

In the United States, 32 percent of all corpses are cremated, a number that is expected to rise to 57 percent by 2025, according to the Cremation Association of North America, based in Chicago.

Most of us don't know about all of the opportunities that exist outside the funeral home, he said.

"Green burial really speaks to old-fashioned American values of frugality, simplicity, a love of family, a desire to do it yourself and self-sufficiency, and a respect for tradition," Harris said.

Frieda Barefield, who is in her 60s, has investigated green burial for herself and her husband. They would like to be buried in a natural cemetery around their hometown of Pipe Creek, but Barefield says the Huntsville cemetery near Houston is too far away. So they are looking into cremation.

"It seems to be a tremendous waste of resources to put all this formaldehyde into boxes in the ground," Barefield said.

One of the largest conservation burial grounds in the United States is in Santa Fe, N.M. The 15-acre community burial site is on a 13,000-acre former cattle ranch that is permanently protected by the nonprofit Commonweal Conservancy organization, said Joe Sehee, executive director of the Santa Fe-based Green Burial Council.

"We're selling off 100-acre and 500-acre parcels to families that want their own burial grounds," he said. "It's all about this bigger conservation and restoration effort."

It's a relatively young movement. In 1998, one of the nation's first official natural cemeteries, Ramsey Creek in Westminster, S.C., opened to burials. Nationwide, 15 designated natural cemeteries exist, and a dozen existing cemeteries have begun allowing for "green/vault less" burial on their property, Harris said.

In Texas, the Universal Ethician Church runs a cemetery in Huntsville on 81 acres of mostly piney woods. It is the state's only official natural cemetery. George Russell, who oversees the cemetery, requests a minimum donation of \$300 for a single plot and \$3,000 for a family plot, but does not require any donation from people who have no money to give.

"It took an awful lot of red-tape cutting to get it established," Russell said.

A natural cemetery consists of dedicated woodland in which the dead are buried, wrapped in nothing but a shroud or laid into coffins of pine, cardboard or some other biodegradable material. The site is dedicated as a natural conservation area. The grave sites bear small markers usually made of fieldstones flush to the ground.

Aside from natural cemeteries, another popular green burial movement involves creating artificial ocean reefs. Since 1998, Atlanta-based Eternal Reefs has taken cremated ashes and mixed them with concrete to create reef balls, which weigh between 400 and 4,000 pounds. The balls get dropped into select places in the ocean

to create artificial reefs. Coral polyps, anemones and other creatures attach themselves to the balls.

A reef ball memorial costs from \$995 for a community ball to \$5,000 or more for a dedicated one, according to Eternal Reefs. The balls are expected to last as long as 500 years in the ocean.

Home funerals are another option. Green burial at home harkens back to pre-Civil War days when Americans handled and buried their dead, Harris said.

In Texas, people can act as funeral directors, get death certificates and conduct home funerals and a backyard burial if the city or county permits it, Harris said.

But in San Antonio or within any city limits in Texas, backyard burials are not allowed, said Peggy Schiffman, a spokeswoman with the Funeral Consumers Alliance of San Antonio. In some rural areas, the county may permit family burial plots if the family has enough acres and adheres to strict state and local guidelines on burial.

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