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## Seeking Harmony in a Final Return to the Land

By JULIE DUNN

**B**ABS McDONALD of Athens, Ga., says that when death takes her, there will be no reason for her family to spring for an expensive coffin and elaborate headstone.

"What do I need it for at that point?" said Ms. McDonald, 50, an environmental educator for the Forest Service. "I don't even want a cardboard box. I want my body to give back to the earth. It is supposed to decompose and nourish the earth, become food for all the microorganisms."

Ms. McDonald is among a small but growing number of people who want environmentally friendly or "green" burials. The goals, they say, are to conserve land and to cut down on what they see as unnecessary pollution from the hundreds of thousands of gallons of embalming fluid and thousands of tons of metal that are deposited into the ground each year.

While the Environmental Protection Agency says that the formaldehyde and human wastes from a buried, embalmed body can potentially cause disease in humans or harm aquatic life, no studies have found conclusively that embalmed bodies are a risk to water supplies and soil. Still, some advocates of green burials say there is cause for concern.

"From a common sense standpoint, putting a chemical that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration deems toxic into the ground certainly can't be beneficial to the environment," said Joshua Slocum, executive director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance, a nonprofit group.

Looking ahead to her own green burial, Ms. McDonald last year bought two plots - one for herself and one for her husband - at Ramsey Creek Preserve, which opened six years ago in Westminster, S.C. "I see it as a win-win situation," she said. "Death is really just a part of life, and this is a great way to preserve a piece of land."

The rules for green burials are simple: coffins must be nontoxic and biodegradable, no vaults are allowed and embalming fluids are not used. Headstones are not permitted; flat rocks, plants and trees are used as grave markers.

"Cemeteries need to become more than cemeteries," said Dr. Billy Campbell, a physician in Westminster and a longtime environmentalist who opened Ramsey Creek, a private, for-profit company. "We want to redefine how we use this space. We're trying to create something that people don't think of as 'The Blair Witch Project' creepy. Ramsey Creek is a great place to go for a hike, do some bird watching, even hold a wedding."

More than 30 people have paid \$1,950 each to be interred at the 35-acre Ramsey Creek preserve, and an additional 75 have bought plots, he said.

"Our goal is to have only a 3 to 5 percent interment density, which would be about 1,000 people on all 35-acres, as compared to 1,000 people per acre at most traditional cemeteries," he said.

Such burials have been gaining popularity in Britain. More than 180 green-burial cemeteries have been established there in the last decade, according to the Natural Death Center, based in London.

The idea is not yet as popular in the United States; besides Ramsey Creek, two other green cemeteries are the 350-acre Glendale preserve near DeFuniak Springs, Fla., and the ***81-acre Ethician Family Cemetery near Lake Livingston in San Jacinto County in East Texas***. Both have opened in the last year and have not yet conducted any burials.

More are on the way. Dr. Campbell recently went into a partnership with Forever Enterprises, owner of 10 cemeteries nationwide, including the Hollywood Forever Cemetery, to buy and convert 17 acres in Marin County, Calif., into a green cemetery and nature preserve.

"Even though it's not that large of a space, it gives us an opportunity to show off what we can do," Dr. Campbell said, adding that burials were expected to start in the spring and to start at other California sites by year-end.

Tyler Cassity, president of Forever Enterprises, said: "I feel optimistic about this, looking at what's happened in Great Britain and just on demographics alone. The big question is: Will a large enough percentage of environmentally minded people be willing to do this to save the land?"

Burials are not the only way to go green. According to the Cremation Association of North America, 17 percent of those who choose cremation do so for environmental reasons, though it found that the main reason is cost.

Cremations were done for more than 27 percent of all deaths in 2002, at an average cost of \$1,000 to \$1,200, and the association estimates that the share will climb to 39 percent by 2010. According to the National Funeral Directors Association, the average cost for a burial with a coffin in September 2003 was \$5,394.24.

The shift toward cremation has been accompanied by more environmentally friendly memorial sites for cremated remains.

Horan & McConaty, a funeral home in Aurora, Colo., a suburb of Denver, recently opened such a site, the one-acre Rocky Mountain Memorial Park. It includes a waterfall and pond. "I was very passionate that this have an organic feel to it," said John Horan, the president of Horan & McConaty. "I wanted people to feel like they're in a high mountain meadow."

Prices at the park range from \$125 to scatter ashes to \$2,000 for a niche in a columbarium wall, where remains can be sealed.

"The baby boomers are largely redefining what we're doing because they are much more sensitive about the environment and find greater value in ecologically friendly burials," Mr. Horan said. "The previous generation had a real sense of duty about burials and funerals, but my feeling is that the baby boomers don't feel inclined to do the same thing. They're largely choosing memorialization options that reflect the life of that person and the way that they lived."

FOR the last 16 years, Barbara and Don Blehm have been running the Mountain Wilderness Memorial Park, a two-acre site in rural Woodland Park, Colo., at the base of Pikes Peak. Cremated remains of more than 150 people have been scattered or buried there.

"We saw that some families really need a place that they can identify with to scatter their loved ones' ashes," Mrs. Blehm said. "I think that interest in this has grown greatly."

Those who prefer the water to dry land can turn to Eternal Reefs, a company based in Atlanta that mixes cremated remains into cast concrete to create artificial coral reefs. Since 1998, the remains of about 300 people and one dog have been submerged at one of 11 sites.

"They actually become part of the reef," said Don Brawley, Eternal Reefs' founder and president, who also

was co-founder of the Reef Ball Development Group, which makes synthetic marine habitats.

Mr. Brawley came up with the idea for Eternal Reefs after his father-in-law asked that his remains be mixed into one of Reef Ball's modules. "He said, 'I would rather spend eternity with all that life down there than in a field with a bunch of dead people,' " Mr. Brawley recalled. "The next thing you know, everybody was asking us to do it. And it has blossomed from there."

Loved ones of the deceased can participate in every step of the process, from choosing the location of the reef to accompanying it on a chartered boat to its final resting place. Prices range from \$995, to become part of a community reef with several commingled remains, to \$4,995 for an individual reef.

"This is good for the environment, good for the families and good for the soul," Mr. Brawley said. "The baby-boomer generation wants to give something back. Things are changing; this is going to be the next big thing."