

Green Memorial Concept Growing in Virginia

Centreville Company Plants Cremated Remains in Tree Root Systems

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The expression "living memorial" has never been so literal.

Start-up EcoEternity is launching an unusual twist on cremation interment in Middleburg. Trees, not burial plots, are the final resting places for the ashes of the deceased.

For a price, the Centreville-based company will plant cremated remains in a biodegradable urn, or without any container at all, beside a mature tree to be soaked up by the root system.

The idea is that over time the deceased will become one with their personal trees. The concept isn't that far fetched. Terry Clark, associate director of science and education for the Society of American Foresters, said ashes do mix into a tree's soil, much like fertilizer. "Though I don't know what nutrients are in human ash," Clark said.

EcoEternity is one of several companies nationwide trying to stir interest in back-to-nature funerals. In some cases, these green alternatives are just new labels for cremations in which people sprinkle the ashes of, say, a scuba diver over a coral reef. Some firms are trying to institutionalize such practices by offering memorial grounds and special services.

Tree burial has won some converts in Canada, Europe and parts of Asia, but it has yet to catch on in the United States. "It's new and too soon to figure out if this is a fad or something here to stay," said Bob Fells, spokesman for the International Cemetery, Cremation and Funeral Association. There are no official numbers for so-called green burials, but proponents cite the steady rise in U.S. cremations as an indicator of interest in alternatives to burials in coffins. In California and the District, for instance, half of all the deceased were cremated in 2006, according to one estimate. Cremations have been less popular in Virginia and Maryland, where they represented 28 percent of deaths.



Virginia start-up EcoEternity, co-founded by Axel Baudach, plants cremated remains beside a mature tree to be soaked up by the root system. (By Dayna Smith -- For The Washington Post)

EcoEternity hopes to open a forest cemetery in each region of the country. Though no ashes have made their way to the Middleburg forest, the company is already looking to expand into South Carolina, home to the first U.S. green cemetery, a nature preserve that hosts un-embalmed burials and ash scatterings.



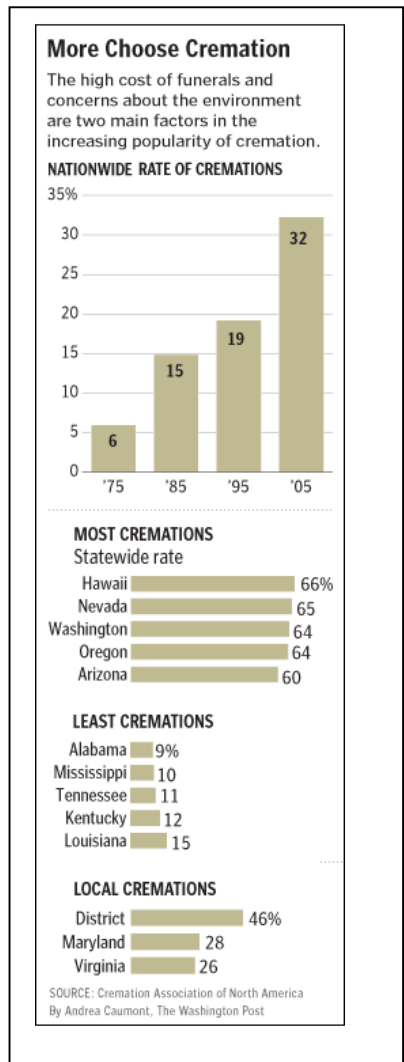
In Loudoun, EcoEternity partnered with Camp Highroad, a Christian adventure camp, to designate three acres of the camp's forest for the venture. It has the option to expand. The camp, a ministry of the United Methodist Church of Northern Virginia, has a giant wooden cross in the center of its forest. However, people of any religion are welcome to choose one of 184 trees, said EcoEternity co-founder Jack Lowe.

The company plans to preserve the site mostly in its natural state, save for a dirt path on which campers can continue to ride horses and hike. Small, discrete tags will identify the names of the deceased associated with each tree. Tombstones will not be allowed, and plastic flowers are strictly prohibited.

"When people go visit cemeteries, it's a depressing situation," said EcoEternity co-founder Axel Baudach. "Every cross over every headstone reminds them of someone who has died. They don't like going there. Going to the forest is a different exercise." Cremation isn't 100 percent environmentally friendly. It requires energy to perform and releases small amounts dioxin and mercury into the air. However, it is a less noxious and resource-consuming alternative to traditional practices.

Mark Harris, author of "Grave Matters: A Journey Through the Modern Funeral Industry to a Natural Way of Burial," calculated that a 10-acre cemetery contains enough coffin wood to build more than 40 houses. That same cemetery holds about 900 tons of coffin steel, 20,000 tons of vault concrete, and countless gallons of weed killer and pesticide to keep cemetery lawns green. Plus there's enough formaldehyde, a toxic embalming fluid, to fill a small swimming pool.

Gary Hosaflook, administrator of the 128-acre Fairfax Memorial Park cemetery, doesn't consider cemeteries unfriendly to the environment. He said there is no definitive proof that graveyard toxins can leech into the soil, and noted that existing cemeteries preclude other development. The land "wasn't sold for anything else, so you can't put residential areas in," he said. "So it's not really an issue of wasting space."





EcoEternity's price for leasing a tree starts at \$4,500 and increases by species, location and age. Each tree is a shared eternal resting place under which up to 15 family members or friends can be interred over a period of 99 years. "I think it's a lovely way for a family to bond together, instead being put in coffins in cemetery plots," said Michelle Burry of Ashburn, who said she is considering tree burial because global warming has made her more ecologically aware.

Those who don't want to purchase their own tree may buy a portion of a tree for \$800 that the deceased will share with strangers. EcoEternity interment will cost an additional \$300. A traditional funeral costs about \$6,000, according to the Federal Trade Commission. But extras -- such as flowers, limousines and obituary notices -- add thousands of dollars. Many funerals cost more than \$10,000, according to the FTC. If an EcoEternity tree is damaged by a storm or lightning, a nearby tree can assume the original's role, the company can plant a new tree or descendants can select a new specimen.

Baudach said he first discovered tree burial in Switzerland and brought the concept to his home in Germany. "When I first started, people said, 'He's a lunatic to quit a senior management position to invent a new cemetery,' " said Baudach, who started his business in 2001. Baudach now operates 20 forests, which range from 75 to 2,500 acres, in Germany. Last year his company leased 4,500 trees and performed 2,500 interments. He has helped bring the concept to South Korea, a densely populated country where the lack of cemetery space has become a national problem.

Lowe and Baudach had met in Germany in the 1990s while working for an American technology company. They kept in touch, and last year they decided to bring tree burial to Northern Virginia. Gene Swearingen, Haymarket's town manager, said he's considering cremation and wants to show his children the Middleburg forest for their approval.

"It like it out there so much," he said. "It's a very, very peaceful place."