

ENVIRONMENT



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Eco-friendly cemeteries

How natural burials are 'greening' funerals

By [Meribeth Deen](#)

A 10-minute ferry trip off the east coast of Vancouver Island, Denman Island is a 50-square-kilometre patch of forest and rocky shorelines, with a handful of traffic lights, no police force and a volunteer-run fire department. It's home to about 1,100 residents, a tranquil haven for people who have fled life in the big city. But when locals move on to the next world, resting in peace is not always a straightforward affair.

At the Denman Island Cemetery, which has been operated by volunteers since 1904, all of the 300 or so burial plots were either sold or committed by the mid-1970s. Since then, bodies have been either buried in pre-purchased or inherited plots or transported off-island for burial. But in the 1990s, when two young children died and both sets of parents insisted on burials close to home, the cemetery's lack of space became an issue and thrust Denman into Canada's nascent natural burial movement.

Plots were found for the two children, and the Denman Island Memorial Society (DIMS) was formed to ensure that no local family would have to face the same struggle in the future. In 2009, the Denman Island Conservancy Association offered to donate a hectare of logged forest across the street from the cemetery, and the two groups are now working together to establish Canada's first exclusively "green" cemetery.

The basic principle of natural burial is that bodies are returned to the earth without chemical embalming. Caskets must be biodegradable, made from untreated wood or cardboard; bodies can also be buried in cloth shrouds. Graves are not lined with plastic or concrete, as they are in most North American cemeteries, and green cemeteries don't feature manicured lawns and tombstones.

"Green burial is part of the movement to reclaim death, instead of trying to sanitize it," says local doctor and DIMS member Doreen Tetz. "I used to see more people dying alone, in hospital. Increasingly, people die at home, surrounded by their families."

For decades, cremation has been considered the most ecologically friendly way to deal with a body; 76 percent of funerals in British Columbia involve cremation, the highest rate in North America. But the method's green credentials are beginning to crumble. Studies have found that cremation releases pollutants such as mercury and carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and it also consumes significant quantities of energy.

Tapping into the "woodland burial" movement in Britain, where there are more than 200 green burial sites, cemeteries in Saanich, B.C., Lower Sackville, N.S., and Cobourg, Ont., have opened green burial sections in recent years. At Saanich's Royal Oak Burial Park, people can opt for burials in a "Woodlands Interment Zone," where bodies "decompose naturally and contribute to new life" near a communal memorial stone.

"Nearly every municipal cemetery in British Columbia is contemplating incorporating some aspect of green burial," says Vancouver-based landscape architect Erik Lees, whose firm designed Royal Oak's green burial section. "I think Canadians are open to considering non-traditional and greener options for final disposition, especially on the West Coast."

DIMS, which hopes to open its cemetery on Denman Island by September 2012, is currently navigating through a complicated bureaucratic process and participating in extensive community consultations. "It's a topic people shy away from," says Tetz, "but given the self-reliant and ecologically aware culture of this island, I think a green cemetery really makes sense."

Downloaded at: http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/magazine/ja11/denman_island_green_cemetery.asp

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