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The Green Hereafter

How to leave an environmentally friendly corpse.

By Nina Shen Rastogi

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I try to be as eco-conscious as possible when it comes to managing my household waste. But lately I've been worrying about what to do when I become waste. What's the greenest thing I can do with my remains when I shuffle off this mortal coil?

The Green Lantern applauds you for thinking ahead. End-of-life decisions are always fraught and emotional; researching your options now—and spelling them out clearly—helps ensure that your loved ones abide by your wishes when you're out of the picture.

If you're like most Americans, you're planning on being buried or cremated. Each comes with a set of environmental burdens, though many of these can be mitigated. (If you prefer to have your body tossed off a boat, the EPA has a [set of rules](#) it would like you to follow.)

Traditional burials are highly resource-intensive. There are coffins to manufacture and ship—sometimes across very long distances, if you choose an exotic wood like mahogany—and concrete vaults to build. (Many cemeteries require coffins to be placed within bunkerlike structures to prevent their neatly manicured grounds from collapsing.) In a [Slate article from 2006](#), the founder of the Green Burial Council estimated that Americans bury more metal each year than was used to make the Golden Gate Bridge and enough concrete to build a two-lane highway from New York to Detroit.

The embalming fluid used to keep corpses looking perky is another ecological *bête noire*. More than [800,000 gallons](#) of the stuff are interred in Mother Earth annually, most of it containing carcinogenic [formaldehyde](#). Finally, burying your bones 6 feet deep means that your corpse will decompose without the benefit of oxygen. Instead of producing carbon dioxide and water, as your remains would if they were buried in topsoil, your body will sludge-ify and begin leaking out methane—a greenhouse gas that, as the Green Lantern has [pointed out before](#), is 21 times more effective at trapping heat than carbon dioxide.

Many people who choose cremation do so because it seems like the tidier choice: less muss, less fuss. If you have your ashes scattered or kept in an urn, you won't be taking up valuable land space. Going without a gravesite also means you cut out the emissions and fuel consumption associated with regular visits from mourners.

But crematories don't run on lollipops and puppy dog tails—most use a combination of natural gas and electricity to incinerate their occupants. One leading [manufacturer](#) told the Green Lantern that a typical



machine requires about 2,000 cubic feet of natural gas and 4 kilowatt-hours of electricity per body. That means the average cremation produces about 250 pounds of CO₂ equivalent, or about as much as a [typical American home](#) generates in six days.

Along with energy consumption, mercury emissions from vaporized dental fillings are the other commonly cited concern. Since the EPA doesn't monitor crematoriums, reliable data are hard to come by, but estimates range from 300 to 6,000 pounds of mercury released annually via cremation. At the high end, that would represent about 2.7 percent of America's current anthropogenic [mercury emissions](#).

On balance, the Green Lantern believes that cremation wins by a nose. First of all, cremations are usually a single-time operation, whereas burial plots require ongoing maintenance. A private [2007 study](#) commissioned by an Australian cemetery found that the average cremation at that facility produced roughly four times as much CO₂ equivalent as a burial. However, when the long-term fossil fuel costs of lawn-mowing and general grounds upkeep were factored in, burials had a 10 percent greater environmental footprint.

With fewer variables to deal with, a cremation also makes it much easier for you—and your family—to quantify and redress its impacts. You can buy [carbon offsets](#), for example, to make up for the equipment operation. And if you're truly worried about the mercury in your choppers, you can request that they be removed before you're incinerated. (Since you'll generally [save money](#) going the cremation route, you'll have extra dough to put toward these procedures.) Look for crematoriums in your area that have the newest equipment—they'll generally be more fuel-efficient and equipped with better filtration systems—and opt to meet your scorching end in a shroud or simple cardboard casket.

If you do decide to go with interment, there are plenty of ways to green up the process. Choose a simple, locally sourced, metal-free coffin and a cemetery that doesn't require a cement vault. (Even if you choose a [biodegradable, recycled-paper burial pod](#), sealing it up in an underground tomb will keep both you and the vessel from composting properly.) Also look for a funeral home that will forgo embalming in favor of refrigeration or dry ice, or at the very least use formaldehyde-free preserving fluid. Contrary to what some funeral directors may suggest, embalment is [rarely legally required](#). The Green Burial Council's [list of recommended providers](#) is a good place to start your planning. (By 2010, they'll be certifying crematoriums, too.)

The absolute greenest option would involve a shroud made from biodegradable fabric and a cemetery that inters its inhabitants in shallow graves and has been designed with an eye toward preserving the local ecology. Right now, there are about 20 burial grounds in the United States that practice [varying levels](#) of eco-consciousness, but that number will almost certainly grow in coming years. If you decide to take your everlasting rest in one of these pastoral settings, keep in mind that you may have to factor in longer road trips. Ask your family to keep your graveside service small and to keep future pilgrimages to an absolute minimum.

If you can manage to stick around for a while, two new technologies have eco-geeks (not to mention sci-fi fans) excited. The process of alkaline hydrolysis involves liquefying your body in a solution of lye and water, resulting in a pile of bone ash and a bottle of biofluid that you can pour on your houseplants. One of its leading proponents, a Scotland-based company called Resomation Ltd., [claims](#) that the procedure has a carbon footprint 18 times smaller than a typical cremator. In the other procedure, called [promession](#), a corpse gets freeze-dried with liquid nitrogen and then shattered into powder, [Terminator-style](#). Neither of these options is commercially available yet, but both the Mayo Clinic and the University of Florida use alkaline hydrolysis to

dispose of their teaching cadavers. So, you experimental types—why not turn yourself into the ultimate recycling project and [donate your body to science](#)?

Is there an environmental quandary that's been keeping you up at night? Send it to ask.the.lantern@gmail.com, and check this space every Tuesday.

Nina Shen Rastogi is a writer and editor in Brooklyn, N.Y.

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