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Monday September 24, 2007

Green Burial Rituals on the Rise

By Elizabeth Birge
Religion News Service

(UNDATED) In life, Lou Tafuri loved to fish in the waters off the New Jersey coast. In death, he sleeps with the fishes. His family couldn't be happier.

Tafuri, who died in 2005, was cremated after donating his body to science. Shortly before the ashes were returned to his daughter Susan, she learned of a program that could provide her father with an eternal resting place better-suited to him than an urn.

Today his remains are part of a concrete ball that make up an artificial reef seven miles southeast of Great Egg Inlet, where fish roam, plants grow and anglers fish.

Soon his daughter will be able to visit him: She plans to take scuba diving lessons.

"You're in the ocean, you're back to nature, you're not clogging up land," said Susan Tafuri, whose father, a Navy veteran, had full military honors at the viewing of the reef ball the day before it was deployed. "The majority of people I know never go to the cemetery."

Memorial reefs are part of an emerging movement in the U.S. toward simpler, less costly, more environmentally friendly burials. The goal is to return individuals to the earth with as little trace or intervention as possible while preserving green space.

Called natural burial or green burial, the practice is generally defined as one in which the body isn't embalmed, is placed in a biodegradable casket and then is set in a grave without a concrete liner.

Cremation, while not a perfect form of natural burial because of the energy required to complete the process and the dioxin and mercury released into the air, is accepted in this category because the remains leave little or no "footprint."

The savings can be significant. The average cost of a traditional funeral is \$6,000, according to the Federal Trade Commission, though some can exceed \$10,000.

The cost of a green burial is less than a third of that, and even lower if it involves cremation and scattering the ashes.

These practices are familiar to those of certain religious faiths, including Jews and Muslims, whose traditions and laws call for burial as soon as possible after death, with no viewing and no embalming. While they may be environmentally sound, centuries of faith dictate the arrangements, not concerns for open space, groundwater, or a more simplified way of dealing with death.

The first green cemetery opened in 1998 in South Carolina. Since then a handful have followed, including ones in California, Florida, Texas, New York and Washington state. They tend to attract people interested in environmental issues or those who have had a close relationship to nature.

Everyone in Genevieve Maiberger's family, for example, was buried in the traditional manner, she said, except her husband, who was cremated 10 years ago. But a few years ago, the retired teacher from Teaneck, N.J., read an article about Greensprings Natural Cemetery in upstate New York, and she was sold.

"I have always thought that we should preserve the environment," said Maiberger, 81. "I think this natural burial is ideal to make our planet a better place for all of us to live; we're contaminating it

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