

A DARKER SHADE OF

GREEN

The topic of “being green” is all over the place: on television, in magazines, online and everywhere in between. But the art of being green can be subjective; a more appropriate term would be “natural,” since it is not considered a fad or short-term interest. But to truly be natural, there must be a control in what it really means. Although the Green Burial Council, its providers and many other natural movement activists have worked tirelessly to educate the public about eco-friendly cemetery and funeral options, “greenwashed” products create a never-ending battle of what’s truly natural. When questions, confusion and misleading claims start to cloud the meaning of green, the truth of eco-friendly burials becomes blurred.

The natural burial movement in the United States is still in its infancy but the interest continues to grow each year, especially with concerns of taking better care of the planet. As much as there are companies trying to provide green burial products to funeral homes and to consumers, there is confusion with what is truly natural and what might not be as eco-friendly as previously stated.

Joe Sehee, executive director of the Green Burial Council and a senior fellow with the Environmental Leadership Program, has been seeing

continuous problems with the natural burial movement. Some of the main issues are a lack of an agreed-upon certification or standard and that companies that produce green burial products can make any claims of eco-friendly benefits without telling the entire story. Sehee believes that unless the natural burial movement is protected from outrageous claims and unneeded confusion, it could be diminished as a fad.

Cynthia Beal, founder of The Natural Burial Co. in Eugene, Ore., even expressed that “green” and

“greenwashed” are actually incorrect terms used for the natural burial movement. “The words were made up by politicians and marketers,” Beal said. “It oversimplified (the natural burial movement).” Beal is an involved advocate for natural burials and The Natural Burial Co. distributes biodegradable coffins and natural burial goods to funeral service providers interested in lessening their carbon footprints.

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Matthews Casket

people peddling off all sorts of green products and green opportunities,” Sehee said. With complex practices

of that. It’s taking people some time to get their mind around that.”

However, for an industry that has

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- Joe Sehee, executive director of the Green Burial Council

related to natural burial products, many of these companies will not be able to be audited or be checked and certified for eco-friendly practices. “We could lose the consumers, the funeral industry and our planet,” Sehee added.

Setting the bar for what natural products should be is also difficult because it must be economically viable for both the consumer and the company making the product. “Caskets have been sold to impede the process of decay and regeneration. Today, in the context of green burial, caskets function more like baskets, meant to allow a body to return to the earth. We don’t want materials to stop that process,” Sehee said. “There is no need for resins or materials that would get in the way

been professionally embalming bodies for centuries, it can be difficult for funeral directors (and consumers) to change their viewpoint. “The funeral industry got trumped into protecting the body as long as possible,” said James H. Bedino, chemist and director of research for The Champion Co., located in Springfield, Ohio. “That is the paradigm that the modern funeral industry has been based on.”

To give funeral directors an eco-friendly embalming option, The Champion Co. created ENIGMA, a line of eco-friendly embalming fluid for natural burials. The product, which is approved by the GBC, works just as effectively as a formaldehyde-based embalming product, but is nontoxic and made

from essential plant-derived oils. A body embalmed with ENIGMA can last seven days or more for viewings and memorials (three to five days is recommended by Champion), but the product biodegrades in three to four weeks. Bedino has seen interest in the company’s new embalming line, even by traditionalists. “I am pleasantly surprised at the sales efforts,” Bedino said. “It’s a leap for professional embalmers.”

One product that has been used in England for more than 10 years and has been gaining interest in the U.S. is AARDBalm, an embalming fluid that also does not use formaldehyde. Instead, the product uses povidone-iodine, which decreases the microbicidal activity of bacteria, fungi, protozoa and viruses. However, iodine is considered toxic, although povidone is a carrier for the iodine and the concentration of free iodine is low in povidone-iodine. But many advocates in the natural burial movement are unsure of the product. Beal believes that the product shouldn’t be marketing itself as green and that “only organic and completely nontoxic ingredients are used,” as the AARDBalm Web site states.

Bedino commented that the product is better than formaldehyde-based embalming fluids (chemically speaking) but that it certainly should

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not be considered green. A material safety data sheet provided by Dr. Peter Cooke, technical director of AARDBalm, states that the product is “not classified as dangerous, according to (European Commission) directives” but that “prolonged contact may cause slight irritation” and it “may evolve toxic fumes in fire” because of the flammability of iodine. “Povidone-iodine, the active ingredient in AARDBalm, is a known skin irritant and has a number of caveats about its use,” Beal added.

“Iodine as an element will not biodegrade in the strictest sense, but can be transformed, and can be considered to be toxic, but in the quantities used in this application the amount to which the environment and humans are exposed is minimal and below natural background levels and experts agree should be considered to be safe, when used as recommended,” Dr. Cooke said. “Its use as an alternative to formaldehyde in the embalming areas can be considered to be a safer alternative. However, as we know, there are

companies and individuals who will always look at negatives and exaggerate the effects, as I believe to be the case in this instance.”

With the negative press of formaldehyde and its apparent carcinogenic properties, Sehee believes that AARDBalm is going in the right direction. “I’m a fan of the product and I think it’s an enormous step forward from formaldehyde-based embalming fluid,” Sehee said. “We’ve made the decision as an organization, just recently, that we want materials in our postmortem products to be nontoxic and nonhazardous. We had to set the bar someplace.”

“There is a real art to eco-certification,” Sehee added. If standards are set too high, it will not be economically viable to providers who wish to be certified and could damage the natural burial movement exponentially. “What happens in other industries when that has been done, when people have been too strident, there have been splinter groups that have really greenwashed, and we try

to stay away and prevent that,” Sehee said.

Sehee and others in the natural burial movement are trying to make consumers more comfortable with the idea of life, death, decay and rebirth, instead of using a casket that is polished and chemically finished like a piece of furniture.

One growing issue for the natural burial movement is the transportation carbon footprint of eco-friendly burial products that come from far away or foreign areas, Beal added. Although the product might indeed be natural, is the transportation pollution almost canceling out the green aspect? “Do you care (if you are a green consumer) that this product has to travel all the way from China? Do you care about the carbon footprints associated with that journey? Do you care about the labor conditions where the plant is? If it matters, you should be able to make decisions based on that,” Sehee added.

“I have found that the larger manufacturing companies that are used to churning out caskets at phenomenal rates are the least green.

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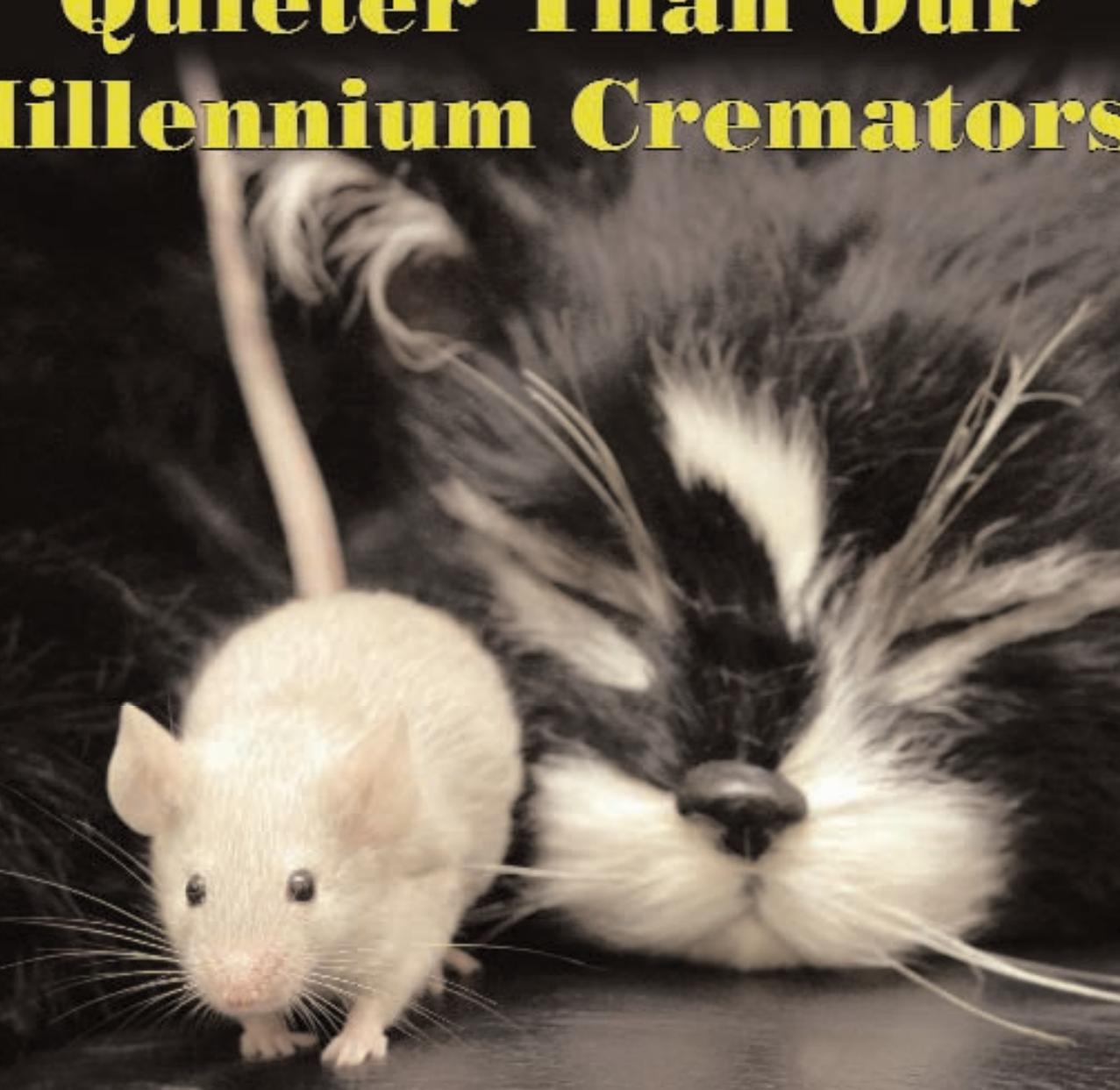
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After all, it is cheaper to purchase wood from Asian countries. We know because we are approached often by salespeople from other countries, especially China,” said Kim Zorn, the owner and founder of Green Casket Co., as well as a hospice nurse. “Many times, these caskets are made with metal to hold them together. We use no metal. It is easy to see the difference with a handmade casket versus an assembly line one. To me, when you are going outside of the U.S. to buy anything, you are not reducing your carbon footprint.”

Questions that Zorn believes funeral directors should ask companies about natural, biodegradable caskets include:

- Where do you buy your wood?
- Can the certificate stating that it is made from an American sustainable forest be viewed?
- Do you use metal?
- Do you use any toxins, stains or paints that would harm the earth? If so, what are the brand names?
- Are your caskets insured for liability?
- How much weight will it hold? How have you tested this?

If the concept is promoted correctly to the funeral industry, consumers will pay slightly more for a product that they truly believe in – but there must be some sort of standard that the

industry can agree on. “This is why we can’t allow people to define it in their own ways,” Sehee added.

Complications still arise, however. Dealing with new areas that have not been explored continues to be a problem, like what the reoccurring price list for natural burial products should be and what is really nontoxic and eco-friendly. “We realize we need to move beyond telling a great story and it’s going to take a lot of work in order to do this credibly,” Sehee said.

Adding to the issue of credibility, Beal said, “A funeral director needs to find a product that they believe in. No funeral director can sell what they don’t believe in.”

And people who go for natural burial know why they want to do it, too. “No one goes to a Toyota dealership wanting to buy a Prius and expects a lecture on climate change,” Sehee added.

Sehee is not negatively speaking about funeral directors or traditional services, however; he believes that the work of the funeral home is very important and will continue to be. “What we need to do is provide a number of options that green up practices and products and let families make their own decision. But we have to have good data to do that,” Sehee said.

And therein lies the problem: Data for all natural burial products is not always readily available, especially with the misrepresentation of companies that might be using practices that are not eco-friendly in the manufacturing of a product. Different levels, or shades of green, were then created to categorize various options in the natural burial movement for all types of green consumers, but this has proved to be somewhat of a problem to the cause.

Sehee mentioned that the GBC received information of an eco-plywood and a soy-based burial product that had toxins in it. “It’s not about slapping an eco-friendly sticker on a product,” Sehee added.

The lack of standard certification leaves some funeral directors worrying that there is risk with promoting more eco-friendly options. “There is risk; it’s not the risk that some people have pointed out that an unembalmed body is going to spread airborne pathogens, which is not true, or that a green casket that is meant to biodegrade is going to fall apart at the funeral home, that’s not true,” Sehee said. “But what is true is that funeral directors who sell products or recommend facilities that they cannot vouch for are taking on risks, and unnecessarily so.”

Although the GBC and other natural burial advocates are working hard at continuing to educate the funeral industry and its consumers, they don’t want to be the enforcer. “We are hoping to pass the baton. We don’t want to be the regulator,” Sehee said. “We want a good regulatory entity to take over this idea but someone who understands environmental stewardship. We have to find new means of enforcement, and this will require government involvement at some point.”

The best advice is to stay away from product offerings if there isn’t a trust provider. “I don’t know how a funeral director, with all they need to do, can stay on top of it when *we* have enormous difficulty doing it ourselves,” Sehee added. “Can you imagine if funeral directors were trying to chase down that information and do that analysis by themselves?” •

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