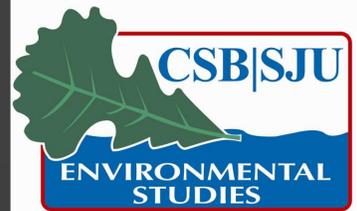


RECYCLING YOURSELF: THE MOST SUSTAINABLE OPTION TO DISPOSE OF HUMAN REMAINS IN THE LONG RUN

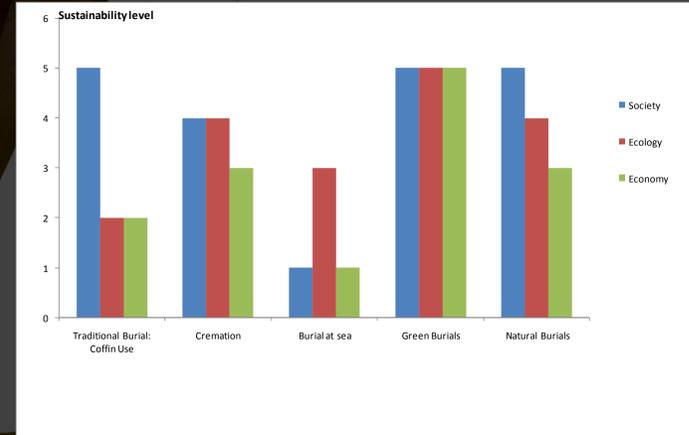


Iphigenie Nshutinyayo, Environmental Studies
Dr. Jean Lavigne (Environmental Studies), Dr. Ernie Dietrich (Economics)



Abstract

Life is a wonderful gift. But unfortunately, death is an unavoidable part of it. The price of dying extends beyond simply paying the funeral fees and rather includes such environmental costs as air pollution from cremation and pressure on land resulting from the use of elaborate coffins. I studied burial options available in the United States, evaluating the sustainability of each using a value map that measures three components of sustainability: ecology, economy and society. Personal and phone interviews were conducted to collect data, and I visited local cemeteries and funeral homes. Given the number of burial options available to dispose of human remains, it is important that we choose the most sustainable one for us, for the earth and for future generations. Results show that green burials are the most sustainable burial option.



Eco-friendly Coffins and Urns

St. John's Woodshop Simple Pine Casket and Pine and Oak Urns



Richard Bresnahan's Ceramic Urn



Burial Options in the United States

- 1. Traditional coffin use:** This option is the most popular because it has been in use for a long time and presents consumers with a variety of beautiful coffins to choose from. The total price of this burial option is high because it includes other inevitable costs such as embalming for the viewing of the body, and concrete vaults as required by cemeteries.
- 2. Cremation:** Cremation is gaining popularity because it costs less than interment. It also is considered eco-friendly since it does not take up as much land space as coffins do. The Cremation Association of North America projects 1,909,802 cremations in 2025.
- 3. Green Burials:** These burials are "those that ensure the burial site remains as natural as possible in all respects. Interment of the bodies is done in bio-degradable caskets, shrouds or favorite blankets. No embalming, no concrete vaults" (Green Burial Council).
- 4. Sea Burials:** There are cremated and non-cremated burials at sea. The latter are not very common for civilians not only because they cost up to \$10,000, but also because people wonder what happens to the body in the water. This option has strict federal regulations.

Other less common options include home burials and body and organ donation.

Results

The graph above shows that green burials are the most sustainable option to deal with the dead, incorporating the three in a balanced way.

In the *society* category, traditional burials, natural burials and green burials were given a 5, which means a high sustainability level, because they are socially accepted as normal. In contrast, sea burials were a 1 (low sustainability level) because some might perceive this option as throwing away the dead and not burying them.

As far as the *economy* category is concerned, green burials received a 5 because they are less expensive than traditional burials. This category was measured by analyzing the 'real' prices that people pay for different burial options.

Green burials have a high sustainability level under *ecology* for how environmentally conscious they are. Traditional burials only get a 2 in this category because of the waste and chemicals associated with them.

Conclusions

Green burials are the most sustainable burial option. Benefits include reductions in carbon emissions, toxins, and waste, all while costing less than other burial options since the products used are made from simple and less expensive materials. Choosing a green burial now relieves your loved ones of the distress that comes in having to make difficult, and often costly, decisions after someone's passing.