

by Larry West April 17, 2012

How Your Death Can Make the World a Better Place

Bob Riley wants your body. He also wants the bodies of your friends and relations, and even your pets, but only after they've been cremated.



Riley, 59, an avid environmentalist and entrepreneur, is the founder of ecoMemorial.org, an organization that offers people an alternative to traditional burial and an innovative way to create a memorial for themselves or their loved ones that will go on living long after they die, while also helping the environment and saving them money.

"Cemeteries are not ecologically sound," Riley says. "Most green and natural burial methods are based on the idea of minimizing the negative impact of human remains on the environment. We saw the chance to create a positive environmental impact that would benefit future generations."

Death Supports Life-giving Projects

In 1996, Riley founded mangrove.org, an organization dedicated to restoring mangrove forests in coastal areas where erosion, storms and human development have destroyed or degraded them and the critical habitat they

help to sustain. He developed a special method of nurturing mangroves to maturity, which solves the problems typically associated with mangrove restoration and ensures a greater success rate.

"The failure of previous mangrove restoration projects was usually attributed to wave action, but the real problem is debris," Riley says. "Because it is driven by the wind and waves, the debris doesn't just arrive on shore and stay put. It moves back and forth, back and forth, and scrapes away any vegetation. By starting trees in a controlled environment, we were able to solve that problem."

Yet Riley's ability to launch and sustain mangrove restoration projects in the places where they are most needed was limited by his lack of a steady source of funding. That's what initially inspired him to start ecoMemorial.org.

"The idea of combining green burial with mangrove restoration was very appealing to me personally, and when I started talking to other people I got a lot of positive feedback," he says. "I saw an opportunity to create self-funding mangrove restoration projects. If funding was no longer a restriction, we could have such an impact."

Mangrove Trees Become Living Memorials

The term "mangrove" describes any of several species of trees that grow in saltwater along coastal regions throughout the world's tropical and subtropical regions and "survive where nothing else can," Riley says. Mangrove forests act as natural barriers that blunt the force of hurricanes and tropical storms, lessening their impact on coastal communities. Mangroves also provide critical habitat for many species, support fisheries that are a vital food source for many of the world's people and play an important role in the broader coastal ecosystem that also includes coral reefs.

Through ecoMemorial.org, people can designate that their cremated remains, or those of a family member, be used to nurture mangrove seedlings until they grow into mature plants. Information about each person's memorial mangrove tree is entered into the ecoMemorial database, with GPS coordinates that will help friends or family members visit the site whenever they wish.

"Instead of a tombstone, you end up with a living memorial," Riley says. "Scattering your ashes in the ocean does nothing to benefit the ocean. Putting you in a cemetery does nothing for the environment. A tree becomes an extension of you, a continuation of life."

Creating a living memorial with ecoMemorial.org is also much less expensive than traditional burial in a cemetery. The organization charges \$450 for a memorial when cremated remains are provided, and \$300 to create a living memorial without any human remains. In 2011, the CNBC reported that the average cost of traditional burial in the United States was \$7,000.

Right now, ecoMemorial has a mangrove restoration project along the Caribbean coast of Belize, near the Hol Chan Marine Reserve and the Belize Barrier Reef. Riley estimates the site has room for as many as 10,000 mangrove trees.

"When I die, I want my children to celebrate, not mourn," Riley says. "Visiting my memorial could be a great trip for my kids and their families -- diving, hiking and birding in a beautiful place. I like knowing that my last act is going to help my children and grandchildren, who are growing up in this world."

Spend Eternity with Your Pets

The site also offers people an opportunity to create living memorials for their pets, or to include a beloved animal companion in their own memorial.

"As we started exploring this idea, we discovered that some people wanted to be buried with their pets, but most cemeteries don't permit that," Riley says. "That's an additional benefit we can offer people who love their pets and want to spend eternity with them."

On some days, Riley says he wonders if ecoMemorial.org may ultimately have a more lasting impact than the mangrove restoration projects it was created to support.

"My vision is that we can change the way people view the end of their lives, that they begin to see their death as an extension of their life, and not the end," he says. "The era of the cemetery is going to fade eventually, because of limited space. But this is a way to make people's passing have a positive impact on the planet, to make a contribution rather than harm the environment. That's going to resonate with a lot of people."

Larry West, a freelance writer in the Pacific Northwest, is a former award-winning environmental journalist.