

# Karen Telleen-Lawton: Plotting an Eco-Exit

Two companies have developed environmental alternatives to traditional burial and cremation

By [Karen Telleen-Lawton](#), [Noozhawk Columnist](#) | Published on 07.12.2010

Despite my dual interests in financial planning and environmental issues, I had never thought about how to effect a green exit — until now.

I've assembled financial and personal exit strategies: a will, a health-care directive and even my favorite hymns to be sung at a memorial. I chose cremation because — *ashes to ashes and dust to dust* — I want my body to return to the earth. But I hadn't really given much thought to what actually happens to a corpse, until I learned about [Promessa Organic](#) and [Resomation](#). These companies and a few others are innovating in the space of environmental alternatives to burial or cremation.

So what's wrong with traditional means? I guess we all know that bodies aren't preserved indefinitely in a casket; we just don't like to think about what really happens inside. Turns out, the lack of oxygen in the deep earth where casks are buried, along with the high moisture content of bodies, means that bodies rot, liquify and decay instead of turning into organic soil. There's also the formaldehyde and other chemicals undertakers use to prepare bodies that may leach into the water table.

Cremation has its own issues. One is the energy required to incinerate a body. So much is used that 573 pounds of global-warming causing

carbon dioxide is released. Equally troublesome is the mercury released from dental fillings. A study detailed on the [Environmental Protection Agency's Web site](#) noted that in 2005 U.S. crematoria released about 6,600 pounds of mercury into the environment. (It's not regulated.)

But solutions are around the corner. Sandy Sullivan, a biochemist in Glasgow, Scotland, invented a biochemical alternative while researching ways to dispose of bovines with mad cow disease.

“The Resomation process involves placing the corpse in a pressurized steel chamber with potassium hydroxide. This reduces the time and heat required to cremate the body by 80 percent,” Sullivan wrote. “At this point, any dental amalgam remaining is easily separated from the bone ash and can be recycled.”

In addition to Europe, six states — Maine, Colorado, Florida, Minnesota, Oregon and Maryland — have approved Resmation's process, and some other states are reviewing it.

Promessa Organic is a corpse-composting company in Goteborg, Sweden. Founder Susanne Wiigh-Masak is an environmental engineer with 15 years in a petrochemical plant. Her process allows the body to quickly decompose into soil by resolving the moisture and oxygen issues as well as one more — size. Microorganisms have a difficult time with organic matter the size of a human body.

Promessa's process overcomes these problems, beginning with pre-treatment of the body and finishing with a biodegradable cornstarch

coffin buried in a shallow topsoil grave. [Click here to check out the Web site](#) to see it in more detail, including graphics showing the process. I clicked to the graphics with a bit of trepidation, but I was finally sold by the last sentence: “A tree can be planted on the grave. It will then absorb the nutrients given off.”

For now, both of these processes are more expensive than their alternatives. If we can ever convince ourselves or our legislators to insist that industrial processes pay their pollution costs, they're likely to be more than competitive. Until then, we may pay a premium for an eco-exit.

It used to be that death and taxes were the only sure things, but now we can add one more to the list: We can achieve life after death by being reincarnated as a tree.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at [www.CanyonVoices.com](http://www.CanyonVoices.com).*