

The costs of funerals are crippling for the poor in many developing countries. The profit-making within the funeral industry extends to insurance packages that are building a culture of extravagant funerals. This creates further pressures on the poor to forego their future well-being through this often-unaffordable practice – or to face the shame, humiliation and guilt of not being able to bury their loved-ones in a manner that is being promoted as dignified and respectful.

In South Africa, many poor people are persuaded to spend significant amounts of money – R2,500 (about US\$350) or more – for a basic coffin. Yet high-quality Eco-coffins can be provided at less than about R350.

COFFINS



Prominent South Africans are committing themselves to be buried in a plain, unpainted coffin. The names of these people will be made public at the formal launch.

CASKETS



Analysis shows that people are being charged between R5,000 and R7,500 for a standard (veneered, chipboard) casket, with all the trimmings. Eco-coffin's solid wood caskets can be priced at about R850 – six to nine times less, for a quality product, and with all of the social and ecological benefits.

The Eco-coffin Project:

- * **T**he coffins are made from wood from invasive alien plants cleared by the Working for Water programme. These plants (including certain pines, gums and wattles) are the biggest threat to South Africa's rich biodiversity, on top of having significant impacts on water security, the productive potential of agricultural land, the severity of wild fires, and many other impacts.
- * **T**he project is labour-intensive at all stages, from the clearing of the invasive alien trees to the manufacture of the coffins. Opportunities are provided for the long-term unemployed. Emphasis is given to opportunities for women, disabled people and former in-mates.
- * **T**he coffins will be made available to the poor at cost-price, through faith-based organizations in South Africa, working in partnership with local authorities, traditional leaders and ethical funeral companies. Faith-based organisations that provide pastoral care are working with the project to give specific counselling on the benefits of simple yet dignified funerals.
- * **T**he Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) will seek support for this project from overseas groups and individuals, expanding the business prospects both regionally and internationally along the lines of fair trade and socially responsible investing.
- * **N**egotiations will take place with the insurance industry to structure funeral policies to optimise the benefits for the families of the deceased. People will also be encouraged to make Wills stipulating their wishes regarding their funerals.
- * **A** labour-intensive component to grow indigenous plants to be used for the rehabilitation of cleared land will also provide trees for planting in remembrance of loved ones.



Labour-intensive approaches are used to clear harmful invasive alien plants.



Workers cut the wood into planks for drying, prior to the construction of coffins.



High-quality training of the coffin-makers has meant that Eco-coffins compare very favourably with the very best coffins made in South Africa. The fact that they are made from solid wood, with good joinery, is an added advantage over most other options.



Simple, quality finishing is used for lining the coffins.



Five basic designs have been made in the Eco-coffin range. Coffins of varying sizes are also made. Biers, used in Muslim funerals, will also be made.



Through the faith-based organizations, the Eco-coffin Project will seek to provide emotional support to the bereaved. This may include the planting of a tree in remembrance of the deceased.



Invasive alien plants spread and grow like an environmental cancer, threatening life and livelihoods - including by intense wild fires. By utilizing the wood, the cost of clearing is reduced.

Contact Details:

Dr Guy Preston
National Programme Leader, Working for Water Programme
E-mail: gpreston@mweb.co.za • Tel: +27.21.441-2700

Mr Martin Palmer
Secretary-General, Alliance of Religions and Conservation
E-mail: martinp@arcworld.org • Tel: +44.122.575-8004

Dr Jabulani Mjwara
Head: KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture & Environmental Affairs
E-mail: jabulani.mjwara@dae.kzntl.gov.za • Tel: +27.33.355-9690

The Eco-coffin Project was awarded US\$150,000 (about R1 million) for a two - year pilot project - one of 31 winners, from over 2,600 entries, in the World Bank's "Development Marketplace" finals in 2005. The project is co-funded by the KZN Working for Water Programme through the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Agriculture and Environmental Affairs.



Patron in Chief: Nelson Mandela



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South African
Faith-based Organizations



Benefiting the bereaved and the environment through dignified and affordable funerals.



A solid-wood coffin made from felled invasive alien plants, using labour-intensive approaches.

Many poor people in Southern Africa borrow money, or use all of their insurance payouts, to bury their loved-ones in ornate coffins. Yet it is possible, and in keeping with all major religious traditions, to hold dignified funerals that do not deepen the plight of the poor.

The Eco-coffin Project aims to reduce the cost of bereavement by producing high-quality coffins at almost cost price. This would mean that any money saved could be spent on the well-being of those left behind. In partnership with faith-based organizations, we are working to ensure that low - cost coffins do not mean any loss of dignity or respect.

The Eco-coffin Project makes use of wood from invasive alien plants that have been cut down by the South African Working for Water programme. Not only are there the environmental benefits of this approach, but a significant number of previously unemployed people are trained to do this work.

Winner of the World Bank's 2005 Development Marketplace Award for Innovation.