



## FD Chat #18 – Living Reefs with Robert Sarnie

<http://www.funeraldirectorschat.com/2011/living-reefs-robort-sarnie/>

**Nancy Burban:** Hi, I'm Nancy Burban, your host of Funeral Director's Chat, a podcast providing funeral professionals with insight to current industry topics, news and trends. As you all know, I love to talk about cremation, and many funeral directors ask me, "how can I increase my revenues when I get a direct cremation?" So, that's one of the topics we're going to chat about today. We're going to chat about "Living Reef Memorial." These are artificial reefs, and you can increase your revenues with this, and your cremation offerings.

We're going to speak with Robert Sarnie today; he's a friend of mine and CEO of "Living Reef Memorial." He's also Head of the Sea Turtle Rescue Organization.

And while there are a few other organizations that actually do artificial reefs or cremation, Robert's organization actually donates their proceeds to the Sea Turtle Rescue Organization, which I personally feel is really a win/win situation. How can you go wrong?

So, I'd like to, without further ado, welcome Robert today. Welcome, Robert.

**Robert Sarnie:** Hi, welcome, and thank you for having me on.

**Nancy:** Thank you for joining me. So, I'm going to get to the basics, because I think a lot of funeral directors may not know what a reef is, especially an artificial reef. So, as a biologist, which you are, can you, in layman terms, basically, chat about what an artificial reef actually is?

**Robert:** Absolutely, and that's an excellent question. Many people don't even understand the concept of what an artificial reef is. Very simply, an artificial reef is a structure where many species of marine life reside. In our case, we design our reefs to mimic the habitat of very specific species of marine life, typically those that have been impacted by humans either directly or indirectly.

**Nancy:** That's a great definition. We know there are a lot of natural living reefs. What is the purpose of an artificial reef? Why do we actually need artificial reefs? Aren't there many natural reefs that already exist in nature?

**Robert:** There are. You're absolutely right. That's a great question. I like to use the analogy of a farm, a regular farm. If I'm this farmer and I want to increase the productivity of my farm, I really need to employ technology in order to increase the productivity. In the case in the oceans, what we have is a great demand for the fish stocks that we consume, and that demand will

continue to rise as populations increase. In coastal regions, where we have seen a great reduction in the fish counts and an increase in rates of species extinctions, it's vital for us to restore some of those ailing fish stocks, reduce the species extinction rates and enhance marine biodiversity.

The question was, "why are these important?" Well, they're important because we take, take, take from the sea and we don't give back. We really need to increase the productivity of, A, our local coastal communities where the majority of the fishing occurs and increase the overall biological productivity of our oceans by placing these artificial reefs in areas where the biodiversity is very low.

For example, if you were to look at our land, you would notice that we have deserts and mountains and Great Plains and everything. It is very similar to the ocean, in that, there are Great Plains and great deserts. The deserts don't really have a lot of biodiversity.

If we were to deploy one of these artificial reefs in one of these areas, what we'll find, very shortly, is that it will become a very biologically prolific reef. It will attract many other fish. What we'll find is that that little area that we place that reef in is now so much more biologically productive than the local areas where they don't have a lot of biodiversity.

**Nancy:** Very interesting. Can you give us an example?

**Robert:** Well, for example, the spiny lobster. Everyone loves to eat lobster. As a result, there's a great demand for that particular species. We're finding that the fish counts, the counts for the lobsters are diminishing; the sizes of the catches are diminishing. That is a direct result of human consumption. So, what we've done is designed our reefs to mimic habitat of this very specific species. The reason for that is twofold, the first being that we know that we consume a lot of lobster, so we need more lobsters to augment that consumption and to balance out our ecosystems.

Equally important is the balance of food sources. Spiny lobsters like to eat sea urchins. It was widely thought that lobsters were only scavengers, but that, in fact is not the case. They do eat live marine life and one of their prey items is this urchin.

Now, urchins love to eat the bottoms of the brown algae that comprise the majority of our kelp forests here on the West Coast. We're finding that we have an imbalance, and our kelp forests are declining. As a result, we're finding that these kelp forests are a natural nursery and habitat for many commercial and non-commercial species of marine life.

So we're really, by overfishing the lobster, we are, in fact, impacting many other species.

These reefs increase the numbers of the lobsters because it is their habitat. They are specifically designed just for the lobsters. We do it for many other species and we incorporate many species into each reef, but we really would like to target on the species that are impacted directly or indirectly, from human consumption.

**Nancy:** Very interesting. Now, OK, I think you've pretty much established that this is a really wonderful thing to do and we're giving back to the sea. Now, how do you involve cremations with this?

**Robert:** Well, in an effort to get as many of these in the water as possible, we've found that it costs quite a lot of money to run our vessels and employ the science and the operating costs and such, so in an effort to fund this particular project, we have decided to charge. What we do is we go to funeral homes and we'll say, "Well, listen, we would like to add this to your product line in an effort to not only reduce the Species Extinction Rates, enhance Marine Biodiversity and to restore our ailing fish stocks, but also to provide you with a product that you didn't have prior to this. This is a Green Burial Solution for the health of our oceans, and it's gaining in popularity.

**Nancy:** Yes, it seems like it is, and I think the people who might be interested in putting their cremains in a living reef would be the people who are really attached to the sea. Is that correct?

**Robert:** Well, our customer profiles are pretty wide and varied. For everyone from yachtsmen and sailors to scuba divers and fishermen, regional people who just love the ocean. But there are many others as well. For example, people really seem to like the idea that their loved one is in a permanent location and more importantly, there is no economic motivation to remove, destroy, molest or vandalize their loved one's resting place. In this particular case, there is every economic motivation to not disturb the reef and allow it to continue to be biologically productive.

**Nancy:** Well, that makes it a lot of sense, and I am a big proponent of sea scattering, but this seems like it takes it to another extreme, because when you scatter remains at sea, they just go into the ocean, you really don't know where they go. But when you actually place them in a living memorial, you know where they are. I mean, is there some kind of a GPS system or something where you actually know where your loved ones are interred?

**Robert:** Absolutely. When we receive the cremains, we employ a positive chain of custody. So at each step of the process, everyone knows where the cremains are. When the reef is finally constructed and deployed into the sea, it is marked with the latitude and longitude with GPS. In addition to that we mark the tide, the time the reef was deployed and some Celestial Navigation Data which most people wouldn't understand anyway. It's really not vital, but simply a redundant system for locating the reef later on. GPS will be around for a long time, but if it ever does go away, we always have our stars to look at.

**Nancy:** That's true. Now, I would assume that a lot of Environmentalists would be interested in placing their cremains in a living reef as well as people who are eco-friendly and into the whole concept of Green Burials.

**Robert:** That's right.

**Nancy:** Now, Rob, let me ask you this. Say I want to put my mom's remains in an urn. Can I still take part of those remains and put it in a living reef?

**Robert:** Absolutely. Again, we are not funeral providers. Our goal is simply to get as many of these reefs in the water as possible. If you would like to take a part of someone's cremains and memorialize them in an artificial reef, we would certainly be happy to accommodate your needs.

**Nancy:** That sounds like a real win/win situation, because then you can actually have part of the remains, whether you want to bury them or you want to keep them in an urn, or some other

cremation device. And then, part of them can actually be part of the environment. And can, as you said, refresh the biological landscape.

**Robert:** That's exactly right.

**Nancy:** Now, tell me a little bit about how your company is set up. I know some of the other companies; this is a multibillion dollar business, isn't it?

**Robert:** Well, it's a nonprofit, so typically nonprofits work on a very close margin. And we're very typical in that regard. All the monies generated through this sustainable ecological enterprise are transferred to many of our other projects, including, as you mentioned, our Sea Turtle Rescue Project, [seaturtlerescue.org](http://seaturtlerescue.org)., where we operate hatcheries. We remove the eggs from the beach or we purchase them from poachers. We place them into our hatchery and we're able to monitor their environment to increase the hatch rates.

Typically, in the wild, due to non-indigenous and indigenous predators, the rate of successful hatchlings is very, very low. It is extremely low, dismal. What we're able to do is increase that up to a 90 percent success rate for our hatchlings. That's vital, because we need more sea turtles in the water.

Again, we're going to go back to the balance of our ecosystems in-which sea turtles will eat jellyfish and jellyfish consume a considerable amount of our fish stocks. Now, we're experiencing jellyfish in greater numbers than ever before, and this is a result of the lack of predation, consumption of the jellyfish. So, what we're trying to do is not only save each individual sea turtle, but to save the sea turtles from extinction, really.

Through education and community involvement we compose and publish integrated educational materials for the local schools. We put on sea turtle festivals. Of course, we do the open water sea turtle rescues, sea turtles that may have been in peril in some form or another and the Hatchery Program, where we take the eggs. We secure the eggs, put them in our own hatchery that's managed, and we are responsible for the success rates of those hatchlings, instead of just letting it be haphazard to local communities that consume sea turtle eggs.

**Nancy:** Hm. That's very interesting. So, basically, the difference between the other Living Reef Organizations that are out there that do make quite a profit, and yours is that you take most of the revenues and funnel it through your other nonprofit, the Sea Turtle Rescue.

**Robert:** We utilize all of the money.

**Nancy:** So, I think that would be a very worthwhile thing to do, for the Funeral Directors to make that offering to the client families, because they're giving all the money back to the environment. As you said, it does take a lot of revenues to actually build these reefs, and so, they're actually helping the environment by putting their loved ones' cremains in the reefs. It's going back to the sea turtles, in other words, world organization. So, how can you go wrong?

**Robert:** I would like to also point out that we do not burn or consume petroleum products in our Deployment Method. We operate purely under sail power with sail boats, and it takes quite a lot longer, but we're able to reduce our costs and our consumption rates by utilizing wind power.

That's another big difference between us and everyone else. It takes a longer, the skill set is a lot higher, to have competent sailors on board that can deploy these artificial reefs on a pitching deck at sea. But we feel that to reduce our footprint is vital. It gives us an opportunity to really validate our position on leaving a positive impact and not leaving an Ecological Debt to the communities in which we serve.

**Nancy:** That's very important, I believe, because it's like a Living Transformation. You're transforming your loved one back into the environment.

**Robert:** I would add, we recently deployed a Gentleman and the Mother had arranged everything. She made a very good point in that; it was as if he was continuing to help our world, even in death. The transformation from cremains into something that becomes alive and full of life was a real positive for her, and she came up to me and she thanked me. She said, "You know, this was a positive in a very, very negative situation. I'm very proud of my son to be a part of the solution instead of part of the problem."

That really...it put a tear in my eye, because she got it, she understood what this was all about, and for me, that's important, because this gives me purpose.

**Nancy:** It is very important. We speak about direct cremations, and of course, the funeral services industry is a business. There's no doubt about that. But also there's a large component in which we want to offer our care and compassion. When people do choose cremation, there needs to be some kind of meaningful ceremony around it. This seems like this would actually really be very appropriate, because, as you said, the cremains will live on in the sea.

**Robert:** That's correct, in another form, and it's a beautiful form.

**Nancy:** Rob, let me ask you, now that we've established what this is, and the significance of it, what type of reefs are there offered? I mean, does one person get put in a reef? A whole family? A community? What is the cost involved? Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Robert:** Absolutely. We have a number of different reefs available depending upon the family's needs. And, for example, we have the Living Reef, which is our flagship reef. This reef is dedicated to the single individual, and the total cost of this is \$3,500. We also have the Loving Reef, which is a little smaller, and has a few different species, but nonetheless, still biologically productive, and that's \$2,400.

To go on down the list, we have the Forever Together Reef. That is dedicated to people who would like to spend eternity together in death, and as a result, two sets of cremains are incorporated into the mix that makes the structure. And that is \$4,000.

We also have the Community Reef. We place up to four sets of cremains in a single reef, and the price individually for that is \$875.

In addition to that, we have a Homecoming Keepsake Reef, where if the family so desires, we will take a portion of the same material that was used in the manufacturing of the larger reef that was deployed into the sea, and we make a miniature version of it. It's mounted onto reclaimed

hardwoods from old ships. We find that that is a fitting end to an old ship. That is intended to go home with the families as a keepsake; that's \$300.

**Nancy:** OK, and the funeral director does make some type of a commission on these items?

**Robert:** Absolutely. They have to be economically motivated to sell the product.

**Nancy:** Of course.

**Robert:** For example, the Living Reef, the commission on that is \$500, which is fairly substantial in that really all they need to do is present the information to their client, and if the client so desires, they simply pick up a phone call and we handle all the rest. So it's really a phone call, and you get \$500. And so on and so forth with the Rest of the reefs.

**Nancy:** OK.

**Robert:** The Christmas schedules are rather handsome.

**Nancy:** No, and not only that but so many Funeral Directors are looking to distinguish themselves and offer unique offerings. Like you said in the earlier part of the broadcast, they have the videos, all the traditional things. This would be - especially for Funeral Directors that really believe in giving back the environment - this would be a perfect offering. And the family, if they're of like mind, are going to feel the same way and they're going to distinguish themselves from the rest of the crowd.

**Robert:** Absolutely. They're provided with the reefs, Funeral Directors are provided with the reefs, an opportunity to sell something that they wouldn't have prior to this. We have the cremation, we have the funeral; we might have a viewing, a video and all the other products. This is one product that will set the final disposition of said cremains in a permanent location that will never be disturbed. I think that's vital for the families to know that their loved one will never be moved, never be disturbed. It is truly the ultimate resting place.

**Nancy:** It's also the resting place that keeps on giving.

**Robert:** That's right, and I think that's one of the big gifts of this entire project, is that it allows people an opportunity to really make a difference, even in death. I think that's vital.

**Nancy:** Especially when you have very sad circumstances, as often happens when someone passes before their time and you're left with that lingering question, "what if he died too soon?" This is a way that you can kind of assuage some of that grief and it's almost like a Grief Reef. You can actually get involved with one of your projects and you have the sense that your loved one is still living on.

**Robert:** That's right. I think the thing that most people really enjoy, for example, on this last appointment it was amazing. Here we had a very young gentleman; he was 26 years old, from Iraq, from the Iraqi war. During the deployment the mother said, "Well, son, you always wanted to bulk up." Here she is making jokes at a time when it couldn't be a more tragic situation of a mother losing her son, and here she is making jokes. That told me right away that this process was alleviating some of the pain that she was experiencing, and for me that's an added bonus.

**Nancy:** It's really beautiful. Now, where are these reefs deployed? Could you talk a little bit about that?

**Robert:** Yeah, we have several locations currently available. We're permitted to be up the Coast at Los Coronado Islands up the coast of San Diego which is a beautiful set of remote and uninhabited islands. They're obviously not on the islands but in the waters around them. We also deploy in Belize which is absolutely gorgeous water, and they obviously need help as well. We offer reefs to be deployed in Nicaragua at our Sea Turtle Rescue Facility. So you can eternally swim with sea turtles. Through our project it is our goal that we will continue to have sea turtles swimming in our seas and coming to our beaches. I think people really seem to enjoy the idea, oh wow, I get to swim with sea turtles? How cool is that?

**Nancy:** It is very cool, very cool. OK, you said you had one that you're going to deploy in Tempe, Arizona?

**Robert:** Yeah, I got a phone call from the Arizona Department of Fish and Game and they have an artificial lake there apparently, the Tempe Town Lake. It's in fresh water and we've really never deployed in fresh water so we really have to reengineer our science. But as a result, what I'd hoped to do is find some of the indigent children that didn't have an opportunity to have a proper burial. I've asked the Arizona Department of Fish and Game if it would be OK if we could memorialize these children in these reefs. It's a community effort and they were really on board with the idea. I'm very happy and honored that the Arizona Department of Fish and Game would give us a call and ask us for help. We're more than happy to do that.

**Nancy:** Right, that's really beautiful. That's actually how I met you, Robert, with the "Bury a Child Foundation," and you offered to put the remains of some of these indigent children in this reef.

**Robert:** Absolutely. We're in San Diego and we find, because of the immigration issue and the desperation of those trying to come across, many of them don't make it. Many of them drowned. We've been in contact with the Mexican Government. Because we're literally right on the border of Mexico and the United States, we interact with Mexico quite frequently and they're our partner. So we've offered the Mexican Government with a way to provide these people with an honorable burial that they wouldn't have had the opportunity to do before.

We also want to be able to do that for the indigent children who don't have the means. We're not in this for the money, that's the thing. We're in this to get as many reefs in the water as possible. This gives us an opportunity not only to give back to the environment but also to humanity.

**Nancy:** Right. You have a dual mission to work with the sea turtles and to actually utilize some of the revenues that you get from the reefs to help the sea turtles, but also to help the sea life perpetuate.

**Robert:** Well, we also do terrestrial habitat restoration and preservation, and that project has been very successful. We've been able to purchase quite a lot of land that was at risk of development in very biologically rich areas. We work in countries where economics seem to always win out over the needs of the environment. Where we find that an area is of great biological value to the scientific communities and humanity, we will, depending on our

resources, go in and straight buy out the land. And then we are able to manage it ourselves, thus removing the economic motivation for its destruction.

**Nancy:** That's a worthwhile project you're working on, and I think a lot of Funeral Directors would give meaning to their work when they're involved with these projects and they're involved with your non-profit organizations.

**Rob:** Every one of them that's involved seems to really get it. They want to do something for the environment, but they have their own business and they're busy. This gives them the opportunity to make a difference in their environment, while still doing what they do, and allowing us to come into their business and bring in our products. Each sale that is made is of benefit to our environment, so in an essence, it is these funeral directors that are the ones really driving this concept. And I'm grateful to them.

**Nancy:** And I'm grateful to you for founding this, because it's such a worthwhile organization. If Funeral Directors want more information, Rob, they can obviously send a contact through Funeral Director's Chat, but can they get in contact with you personally?

**Robert:** Absolutely. We have an 1800 number -- 1800 569 REEF, or 7333. They can also go, I'd invite them to go to the website, it's livingreefmemorial.com. There's a lot of information there on the different products, their prices, how it works, how we construct them, what happens, the process. Basically all the information you'll need is right there on the website. But I also love the interaction, so please, feel free to give me a call at any time. That's 1800 569 REEF, or 7333.

**Nancy:** They can also contact you on Facebook.

**Robert:** Absolutely. "Living Reef Memorial" on Facebook and Twitter.

**Nancyn:** Terrific. Thank you so much for joining me today. I think together we have really educated funeral directors on not only how to increase cremation revenues, but also how to make a significant impact on the environment.

**Robert:** I agree, and thank you for having me on.

**Nancy:** It's been a pleasure. Thank you so much.

**Robert:** You're welcome. Have a wonderful afternoon.

**Nancy:** Thanks, you too.

**Man:** Ordering cremation urns for your funeral home is easy, with unitedpriority.com. Email your client and urn description from our website, or receive tier pricing when ordering more than one item. Help your clients find the right urn, with unitedpriority.com.

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