

Haunted by an overgrown cemetery? Call eco-goats

By McClatchy Washington, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.14.13

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'Eco-goats' begin clearing land adjacent to the historic Congressional Cemetery, Aug. 7, 2013 in Washington, DC. Goats are being used to clear a 1.6-acre plot of land covered with vines, poison ivy and other dense vegetation. Olivier Douliery/Abaca Press/MCT

WASHINGTON — The noise from the goats didn't bother the residents of the Congressional Cemetery. That's because it's where hundreds of politicians, famous people and a couple of vice presidents are buried.

For a week, the 70 goats will clean up part of the graveyard by eating just about anything that's green, and overgrown. They're called "eco-goats" and will munch away at vines, poison ivy, thick plants and almost anything they can reach.

Clearing the plants will keep them from choking the trees, so the trees don't fall on the old headstones. Paul Williams, the president of the group that cares for the graveyard, said he didn't want to use chemicals.

He explained the land is close to the river and dogs walk around without leashes. About a quarter of the cemetery's funding comes from people who pay to walk their dogs there.

Eco-Goats An Old Custom

The floppy-eared brown-and-white goats, a few called Yoda, Buckaroo and Mimi, were camera-shy at first. They wouldn't leave their trailer. Then they'd come out, but run back in to avoid the news crews.

Officials of the cemetery and the humane society moved out the reporters. And the goats ran into the fenced area and started doing what they do best: chomping everything green and leafy around. A half-dozen kids enjoyed watching them chewing vines and bleating an awful lot.

It's an old custom, using animals to clear land, said Williams. He's trying to bring new life to the cemetery, in a manner of speaking. "I kind of hope it opens people's minds to alternatives."

Hiring the 70 goats saves money, too. They can reach vines as high as 7 feet, and cost \$4,000 for six days of work. That works out to \$9.52 per day per goat. Williams called that a bargain price for the work being done.

It's an exciting chance to show how goats can control problem plants, like thick vines and poison ivy, said Brian Knox, the owner of Eco-Goats in Annapolis, Md.

The city of Paris began using sheep this past spring as eco-mowers. They keep the lawns trim outside the French capital's city archives.

Not The First Cemetery Picnickers

Except for an overgrown patch, Congressional Cemetery is quite neat, with small trees and statues among the headstones. A chapel sits in the middle of the grounds. There's also a place where the bodies of many famous people, including First Lady Dolley Madison, were stored temporarily until they were buried.

Two hundred members of Congress and their families are buried at the cemetery. It is owned by Christ Church and gets the name "congressional" because of who's buried there. It's not connected to the U.S. Congress.

Williams is trying to bring back the way people once thought of cemeteries. He explained they were a picnicking spot during the late 1800s. "They were like the first park system."

Chris Kennedy is part of the cemetery's association. He lives nearby and enjoys bringing his dogs to the park-like setting, which he called a "unique and a beautiful thing." Adding the goats as landscapers, he said, was "a cool thing. It's historical. It's ecological."

Might goats or sheep on the National Mall, as eco-mowers for the grass, be not too far off?

“I would not expect that,” said Carol Johnson, a spokeswoman for the National Park Service. There could be damage and other results that might not be expected. But, she added, “It’s certainly an interesting idea.”