

Contacts

## *Women in Yucatan are Confronting the Garbage Crisis at Grassroots Level*

### Anne-Marie Hanson spent Time with Two Groups of Female Activists

It's not every day that a professor holding an endowed position delivers an annual lecture on the subject of garbage. But Anne-Marie Hanson, Patricia C. and Charles H. McGill III '63 Visiting Assistant Professor of International Studies, pulled it off recently when she gave a fascinating talk about two women's environmental activist groups in coastal Yucatan, Mexico, who are dealing with garbage and how their activities relate to global patterns of consumption and the protection of nature.

Hanson used the women's stories to dramatize the disconnections between global consumption and waste habits and international concern for the conservation of tropical wildlife and landscapes.



**Anne-Marie Hanson, Patricia C. and Charles H. McGill III '63 Visiting Assistant Professor of International Studies, delivers the annual McGill Lecture in International Studies.**

Hanson, who has done much research in this part of the world, began her lecture with an anecdote about a women's composting group in Dzilam de Bravo, a small town on the northern coast of Yucatan. The women were raking up seaweed one day when one woman held up a shoe and yelled, "I found one." Everyone laughed. The women explained to Hanson that there was a competition to see who could find the first shoe of the day, since so many wash up on the shore – many made of plastic.

Hanson explained that the story demonstrated "the strange role that garbage plays in our lives and how our consumption patterns affect coastal communities the world over."

Now that the world's population is living in a new geological epoch, called the Anthropocene, in which human activity influences every aspect on earth, Hanson said people are changing the world in countless ways, from warming the atmosphere to acidifying the oceans.

"With the majority of the world's population now urbanized, the average per capita waste generation in all countries is over one kilogram – or 2 pounds per day per person," she said. In industrialized nations, it's closer to 6 pounds per day.

About 7 million tons of debris reaches the ocean each year, and the majority is made wholly or partially of plastic. She noted that

scientists estimate that there are more than 415 billion pounds of plastic in the oceans.

It's the people who live in low-lying coastal areas who are most affected. Indeed, more than 3 billion people, or almost half of the world's population, live within 150 kilometers of an ocean coastline or river delta, with that figure expected to double in 10 years.

International conservation programs are focused on protecting coastal wildlife, but they rarely address the global political and economic processes that allow old shoes and bottle fragments to flow into the oceans, she said.

Alluding to the women who were raking seaweed on the beach, Hanson said it highlights the important work that grassroots social movements are doing to confront the global garbage crisis in regions where coastal communities depend on natural resources for subsistence.

## Women in Yucatan are Confronting the Garbage Crisis at Grassroots Level

Looking at coastal Yucatan, in particular, Hanson said the “garbage problem...is severe,” especially as consumption of plastic products is heavily promoted. “And while most coastal cities in Yucatan are still very small by any global urban standards, the coastal population quadrupled in size in 20 years,” she said. Lacking an infrastructure to deal with the materials, there isn’t a safe place for garbage disposal near coastlines.

Because some of the larger urban areas, such as Cancun, are tourist meccas, many millions of dollars are spent by conservation organizations to maintain the surrounding natural areas, yet ironically, millions of tourists continue to dispose of food containers and other disposable items. “About 50 tons of garbage [are] produced by tourists per day in high tourist season,” said Hanson.

While most men in northern Yucatan are predominantly concerned with fishing, the women – who spend much of their daily lives working at home and in communities built on top of coastal wetlands – see the effects of the garbage on the landscape and experience the consequences of decomposition, soil degradation and infectious diseases, explained Hanson.

In conducting her research, Hanson learned that women were inspired to organize around the issue of waste management largely because of health concerns. Between 1997 and 2002, in Celestun and Dzilam de Bravo, two groups of women organized to collect plastic bottles, compost seaweed and organize cleanup projects. The women were belittled and forced to defend themselves regarding their cleanup of other peoples’ trash.

Nonetheless, the Dzilam de Bravo group has expanded to include more than 400 women in 25 coastal communities. Hanson said each year the women remove more than 80,000 tons of seaweed and 2,000 tons of garbage from the beaches. In 2013, the group was officially recognized by the state environmental agency.

In Celestun, a grassroots recycling group emerged and organized beach cleanup projects. “Currently, in Celestun, almost everyone in town saves their bottles and the women pass by every two weeks to collect them,” Hanson said. “Hardly any bottles go to the dump anymore.”

The women were recently recognized as national examples, and their work has inspired similar recycling projects in 23 other coastal towns. The goal is to expand the project to 60 towns across the peninsula.

Hanson concluded her presentation by noting that women have become “activists confronting global problems” However, in most coastal cities, international agencies have not become full partners, leaving it to the residents to deal with the “huge amounts of garbage that flow in from storms and tourism activities.”

Hanson explained that the garbage problem is global, yet it is also one of the most preventable of all “human-induced environmental crises.” There is a difference between waste management and waste reduction, she said, “and in waste management there is no such thing as throwing away.”

In closing, Hanson said, “one woman in Yucatan told me to remember the analogism posed by [writer] Jose Narosky that goes – ‘while there exists the person who throws broken glass onto the beach, there is also the person who bends down to pick it up’.”

The McGill International Studies Fund was established in 1996 with a gift from Patricia C. and Charles H. McGill III ’63. The gift helped secure a matching grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The income from the fund supports the appointment of visiting humanities scholars, primarily international scholars, in the academic areas of international studies that include African studies, Asian studies, Latin American studies, Middle Eastern studies, global studies, and Russian and Eurasian studies.

Charles McGill is a nationally recognized expert in mergers and acquisitions, and corporate strategic planning and restructuring, with significant experience in consumer products, restaurant and food service, and information services. McGill is the founding partner of Sagamore Partners, an acquisitions adviser. Previously, he was a senior executive of Fortune Brands, Dun & Bradstreet, and the Pillsbury Company. McGill is a former member of the Trinity College Board of Trustees and its Board of Fellows. He received the College’s Alumni Medal of Excellence in 1993. The McGills are the parents of a ’94 Trinity graduate.

To view a photo gallery from the event, [click here](#). Photos by John Atashian.



***Invited guests join Mr. and Mrs. McGill and Hanson for dinner in Hamlin Hall following the lecture.***