



## Witch Doctors in Biotechnology

by SOMER STAHL

Staff Writer

Last Thursday night, Dr. Mark J. Plotkin presented a lecture on "Witch Doctors in Biotechnology" in Warwick Center. Plotkin discussed the importance of preserving the Amazon ecosystem, as well as the cultures coexisting within the ecosystem.

"The fact of the matter is that some of the hottest leads for diseases which we consider incurable, which are only incurable because we can't cure them thus far, come from natural sources. The majority of these [cures] come from natural poisons," Plotkin said.

Plotkin split his lecture into two parts. He first discussed new drugs that are being developed in biotechnology, then focused on the importance of preserving Amazon cultures.

Plotkin mentioned many organisms that have medicinal purpose and significance, including fungus, insects, frogs, plants, and Gila monsters. Each organism is also in danger of extinction if the Amazon is not preserved.

"One of the things that's most interesting right now is the species with the greatest potential are not pandas, are not elephants, are not lions, are not rhinos," Plotkin said. "Its the creepy-crawly critters with very little aesthetic appeal which offer great medicinal potential, particularly those that bare poison."

Plotkin said that diabetes kills four times as many women as breast cancer and spoke of the importance of the western Gila monster's poisons, which contain a compound that can "revolutionize the way we treat diabetes."

Plotkin also spoke of the importance of blood-sucking organisms, such as leeches and the vampire bat, which contain anti-coagulants to stop

blood from clotting. These organisms allow scientists to study clotting at different stages, which helps them treat and prevent different diseases.

"The wonder drugs of the future aren't just rain forest plants; it's rain forest animals, it's rain forest insects...Every species is a genius in survival, every species is a genius in chemistry, and there's a lot to be learned," Plotkin said.

Plotkin has gained much of his information on these animals by talking with people native to the Amazon. He said that could not just show up at a random village and ask to be told its healing secrets, but rather had to develop strong relationships with the natives of the Amazon and other tribes around the world over time. He stressed the importance of preserving these people's culture and knowledge.

Plotkin is the author of "Tales of a Shaman's Apprentice: An Ethnobotanist Searches for New Medicines in the Amazon Rain Forest," and "Medicine Quest: New Medicines from Mother Nature." He has studied healing plants with shamans in Central and South America for the last fifteen years. He has a bachelor's degree from Harvard University, a master's from Yale University and a Ph.D. from Tufts University.

Plotkin's work has been featured in a PBS Nova Documentary, a Fox-TV documentary, on "NBC Nightly News," "The Today Show" and "48 Hours." He has also been featured in the magazines *Life*, *Newsweek* and *People*. In 1994 he received a top environmental award, The San Diego Zoo Gold Medal for Conservation, previously awarded to Jane Goodall and Sir David Attenborough.

The lecture was sponsored by the UNCW Honors Scholars Program.

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