

2019-2020 Humanities Center Brown Bag Series

Theo Colborn, the Great Lakes, and the Discovery of Environmental Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals

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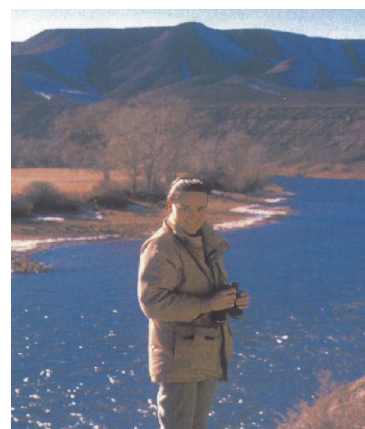
Tuesday, January 21, 2020

12:30PM—1:30PM

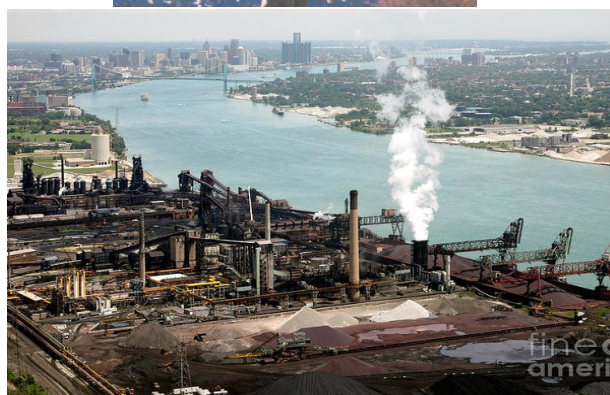
Rm. 2339

Faculty Administration Building

Industrial pollution was hard to escape in the 1970s, especially in the Great Lakes region. Decades of industrial dumping led the Rouge River to catch fire near Zug Island in October 1969. Responding to public alarm (and to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, 1962)—the Environmental Protection Agency was established in 1970 and Environment Canada in 1971. Biologists also were increasingly concerned about the impact of persistent toxic chemicals, especially PCBs, on Great Lakes fauna and began to commission dedicated studies. In 1988, Canadian officials hired Dr. Theo Colborn (1927-2014), a Conservation Foundation and World Wildlife Fund biologist, to produce a systematic study of reported problems in 15 keystone species. Her 1990 findings sent shock waves throughout scientific and government circles. Rather than causing cancer, as expected, Colborn found clear cases of developmental deformities. A hunt soon commenced to identify causes of such abnormalities. She announced the findings in 1991: manmade chemicals in the environment—"endocrine disrupting chemicals" (EDCs) they called them—could interfere with embryonic development in humans and animals. How studies of Great Lakes pollution led to the discovery of EDCs is the focus of this talk.



Pictured:
Theo
Colborn



Marsha Richmond

History

Professor

Marsha L. Richmond received a PhD in history of biology from Indiana University. Having previously worked on the Darwin Correspondence Project, Cambridge, England, she teaches environmental history and history of medicine (as well as Michigan history) at Wayne. She is completing a book on women in genetics, 1900-1940, and embarking on a scientific biography of Theo Colborn and the discovery of environmental endocrine-disrupting chemicals. She is immediate past president of the International Society for the History, Philosophy, and Social Studies of Biology, 2019-2021, and Co-Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of the History of Biology*.

Photo credits: (top photo) Theo Colborn, c. 1976 (Kristy Colborn)

(bottom photo) Zug Island Industrial Area Of Detroit_by Bill Cobb_Fine Art America