



Entertaining Talk by Ethnobotanist Includes Serious Message About Conserving Resources

By Jon Cawley



Chandler Recital Hall, in the Diehn Center, was the venue for Plotkin's President's Lecture Series talk on Thursday. Photo by David Hollingsworth

There was not a seat to spare, and aisle space was at a premium, Thursday evening when famed explorer and conservationist Mark Plotkin took the stage at Old Dominion's Diehn Center for the Performing Arts.

Plotkin, the 2013 Lytton J. Musselman Natural History Lecture speaker, and a Harvard-educated ethnobotanist who has spent decades living among Amazonian rain forest tribes, delivered a riveting talk to the crowd that attended this latest installment in the ODU President's Lecture Series. Musselman is the ODU Mary Payne Hogan Professor of Botany.

Plotkin gained international notoriety in connection to his involvement with the Amazon Conservation Team, which has successfully worked with 32 tribes to map, manage and protect 70 million acres of ancestral rain forest. The group's efforts were documented in the Academy Award-nominated IMAX film "Amazon," in which Plotkin played a leading role.

"I can tell by the crowd more people know about Mark Plotkin than know about botany," Musselman quipped, while introducing the speaker. "This is ethnobotany writ large."

During the lecture, Plotkin - with a keen sense of humor on full display - engaged the audience with stories and analogies that spanned a variety of topics, from his possibly questionable use of poison-tipped arrows in interior design to the American Revolution, the Biblical Magi, climate change, deforestation, medicinal

plants and even the pending sequester. In each case, he deftly tied the discussion to the importance of natural resource conservation and the interconnectedness of all things.

Plotkin also briefly revisited comments made during an interview with Cathy Lewis on WHRV's "HearSay" show that was broadcast Wednesday, in which he referred to ODU as a "veritable hotbed of ethnobotany of the Middle East" as a result of Musselman's research, and characterized the professor's studies as "very important" to the scientific community and anyone interested in the Bible, the Holy Land and ancient plant use.

"When you understand plants, you understand history differently," Plotkin said, during Thursday's lecture, noting that Musselman's students would get the premise. "And that's why ODU rocks!"

Following a lively question-and-answer session, Plotkin spoke directly to the students in the audience, urging them to step outside of their comfort zones.

"You don't know what you want to be when you grow up? That's a good thing. But you're wasting your summers. Join the Park Service, backpack through Europe, work in a Mexican orphanage, help the homeless," Plotkin implored. "Try to find your passion.

"Travel, travel, travel. Read, read, read," he advised, in closing.