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# RUTGERS FOCUS

A PUBLICATION FOR UNIVERSITY FACULTY AND STAFF

## Science and our society

### Rutgers professors present their views at AAAS meeting

February 24, 2003

*By Joseph Blumberg*

How countries might plan for a deadly collision between an asteroid and the Earth was the topic of Lee Clarke's presentation at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, held Feb. 13-18 in Denver.

Clarke was one of three Rutgers professors to speak at the meeting, which brings together thousands of scientists from all over the world. Clarke, an associate professor of sociology; Bonnie McCay, a Board of Governors Distinguished Service Professor of human ecology; and David Guston, an associate professor of public policy, spoke at separate sessions. All three addressed the interaction of science and society.

Clarke, an internationally known expert in disasters and organizational failures, noted that, contrary to what many policy-makers believe, catastrophes rarely cause mass panic. "People are quite capable of following plans, even in the face of extreme calamities, but such plans must be there," he said.

Clarke posed the question of what would happen should

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a comet or asteroid strike the ocean, setting off an immense wave or tsunami and inundating coastal communities. To date, no countries have made plans to cope with such a disaster, although as Clarke pointed out, "an appropriate civil defense plan could focus on moving the population inland prior to impact."

"Earth's history is filled with unanticipated catastrophes and their disastrous consequences," he cautioned. "With appropriate planning, the human toll could be lessened."

Bonnie McCay of Cook College is another international authority, known for her work on marine fisheries management and problems of "the commons" — shared resources such as air and water, ocean fisheries and forests. In her talk, McCay explored the interaction of social and ecological systems — how people come together to manage the commons.

"We typically think of government in this context, but we have been looking at alternative ways in which resource users themselves address their problems," said McCay. She pointed to rubber tappers in South America using their own talents and political pull to try to protect the rainforests that they depend on. "We hope that our studies will eventually result in more effective resource management," she said.

David Guston of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy focused on another kind of interaction. "I am interested in the way the community of science, and that includes universities, gets along with the rest of the world," said Guston. "I am particularly interested in the real kinds of interactions that are necessary between the way science is done and the way society applies those results," Guston said.

"Universities are committed to the premise that all

knowledge is good. Now that they are in the business of producing technologies for commercial gain, however, they need to consider the aspects of technology that may not be so good," he suggested. He advocated creating "centers for responsible innovation" to offer forums through which the public can influence the potential impacts of scientific and technological discoveries.

New fellows Four Rutgers professors were among the 291 scientists elevated to the rank of fellow at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. They are: George F. Farris, professor of organizational management on the Newark campus; David H. Guston, associate professor at the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy; Joachim Messing, University Professor of Molecular Biology and director of the Waksman Institute; and Gerben J. Zylstra, professor in the biochemistry and microbiology department at Cook College. The new fellows were presented with a certificate and rosette pin.

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