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## The Ecology of Cocaine\*

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Gainesville has a love affair with illegal drugs.

On the one side is the responsible recreational users who has been largely unaffected by the legalities of illegal drug use. On a national level, these responsible recreational users spend upwards of 64 billion dollars on illegal drugs a year. In the Gainesville area they spend upwards of 12 million dollars a year on cocaine alone.

On the other side are the bureaucracy, police, trial lawyers, bail bondsmen and others whose livelihood is dependent on illegal drug market. The scope of legal money to be made off of illegal activities is highlighted by the Gainesville Police Department. They have been working off a \$9 million draw of drug forfeiture money from of a single drug smuggler named Claude Duboc.

Caught in the middle are the necessary but expendable foot soldiers of the trade that facilitate the sale and distribution of illegal drugs. They spend large portions of their lives in the jails and prisons of our nation. They also accounted for 1,028 out of 3,430 criminal cases filed in Alachua during the 2003/4-court calendar.

Seldom spoken to are some of the greater consequences of Gainesville's love affair with cocaine. The most ignored consequence is Gainesville's contribution to the ecological devastation in the Andean Regions of Columbia, Peru and Bolivia.

This region produces an estimated 800 to 900 tons of cocaine a year to meet the needs of responsible recreational drug users worldwide.

One acre of cocoa production generates over 800 pounds of chemical waste that is dumped on the grounds as well as into mountain streams. These streams are often located at the headwaters and feed into a larger network of rivers that spread the contamination far beyond the areas of production.

A situation that is similar to the location of a Wal-mart at the headwaters of Hogetown creek. The chemical waste dumped on to the ground further defuses the contamination downward in a manner that is not unlike the Koppers site problem in Gainesville.

Eradication efforts by the United States Government have resulted in the spraying of over a million acres of land with a fungal pathogen called agent green. Can you imagine the uproar of righteous indignation if such a spraying occurred in the United States with a like fungal pathogen?

This spraying has had no visible effect on the overall production of cocaine. The spraying simply forces the cocoa growers to clear new land in fragile ecosystems. A cycle that further exacerbates tropical deforestation and soil erosion.

Among the deplorable aspects of this aerial spraying campaign is that it has destroyed thousands of acres of legal crops along with the coca. This does not take into account the men, women and children that find themselves caught up in the actual spraying or consuming contaminated food products.

This region is also known as one of the bigger lungs of the earth. It is these lungs that convert gases into oxygen on a massive scale needed to sustain human life on the planet.

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We have engaged in forms of chemical and biological warfare on a scale that would not be allowed anywhere in the United States of America. We have endangered the lives of untold numbers of people and created an ecological catastrophe in both the production and destruction of cocaine.

The ecological destruction is trivial compared to the chaos and devastation visited on the average citizen of this region. In Colombia, there are now three armies struggling for control of the Colombian heartland. There are the paramilitary forces and the guerrillas being paid for out of cocaine funds from responsible recreational drug users and the regular army being supported by the US taxpayers.

The question becomes why and to that there is one simple answer. Because it is in no ones best interest to modify our love affair with cocaine. Where as the 8 million a year from Gainesville may not be critical to the overall drug trade it will contribute rifles and chemicals to the devastation of the Andean region.

What is there in the character of a town like Gainesville and its environs that has that has about 220,000 men, women and children? A community whose major economic engines are the University of Florida, Santa Fe Community College, Shands Hospital, North Florida Regional Medical Center and a host of assorted government bureaucracies.

To date, our only solution has been to attack the supply side of a demand driven addiction. This is a "do nothing" solution that involves no political courage and in the end only exacerbates the problem.

Is it not time that we either held everyone equally accountable or legalized the use, sale and manufacture of drugs such as heroine, cocaine and methamphetamines.

The one strategy that did prove effective in dealing with addictions albeit tobacco went down in the flames of their own success. It was the truth commission with its hard hitting and in your face ads written by kids and funded by the tobacco settlement.

Hard hitting and in your-face ads written by addicts and funded by drug money forfeitures could have the same effect on drug usage. However, that is in no ones best interest and takes courage on the part of our political leaders. Courage we found lacking when dealing with tobacco companies, tobacco addictions and kids.