

Visit to the Taj Mahal and Workshop at Agra University, January 14, 2010

By Ginny Harris

Thousands of people come to Agra to see the Taj Mahal and now we know why! It is quite a sight to see. To stand inside such a historic and wonderful structure is breath taking. The detail work made of marble and the designs that seem to tell a story, makes you appreciate the labor that went into each notch and flower. Inside were the tombs of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan and his favorite wife, Mumtaz. The tombs are below the tall dome, at the center. Here the echo of any sound reverberates and seems to last forever. At the opening, Dick, Subijoy, Sumit and I yelled "Yamuna". It sounded like a prayer chant that echoed back at us with wide-opened eyes from all around us. It seemed like they heard a wake-up call. More people need to cry out for the Yamuna-- if they only knew how poisonous and rancid it has become. The Yamuna River flows just behind the Taj and is filled with trash. The Taj Mahal is a monument to love and the Yamuna flows behind it neglected.



The Taj Mahal



Yamuna River directly behind the Taj Mahal



The Team in front of Taj Mahal

After our exploration of the Taj Mahal, the team went to the Agra University (presently known as *Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar University*) with about 50 graduate students and faculty waiting for us. They greeted us excitedly, even giving each of us bouquets of flowers. Dr. Sunder Lal, Professor and Head of the Department of Mathematics provided welcoming remarks for the workshop and stressed the importance of protecting the River Yamuna. Brij Khandelwal introduced the visiting team thereafter and talked about the need for an active participation of the students, staff, and faculty of the University in the Yamuna cleanup effort undertaken by the ROW Foundation (www.rowfoundation.org).



Dick Lahn talking to Participants (Students, Faculty and others) at the Workshop

Once we were introduced, I was the first to speak. Considering their age group, I felt compelled to explain to them how the Alice Ferguson Foundation stumbled upon solving the problem of trash. The Foundation started with the cleanup of 10 people and 2 Cleanup sites and now we have grown to 13,500 volunteers and 500 Cleanup Sites and now cleanup sites in India! I explained how each of the 5 components of the Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative work and how they might work for the citizens of India, but lastly I made it abundantly clear that littering is unacceptable. During my speech I felt the connection with the group. I saw all of their eyes were on me no one was on their phone – texting. They understood what I was saying and I knew that because they laughed at my jokes and were serious when I was serious. I felt confident that my point of not littering was clear.



Students, Faculty and other Participants at the Agra University Workshop

Ram Koduri spoke after me and gave a good speech about being honest and taking a hard scientific look at the water quality issues. Dick Lahn spoke thereafter and made the connection between trash and water quality. He spoke about trash at this session because trash is the visible symptom of a sick river. Trash also allows for other crimes to happen, albeit more violent and detrimental crimes. Trash also is a mobilizer that allows everyone to be involved with solving the problem. Sumit Dutta spoke of his personal experience testing water quality in Maryland as well as offering his support for anyone who was interested in starting a club or organization around water quality issues. Subijoy went last explaining passionately why he has such a deep connection with the Yamuna River. He explained his projects of working with the sewage treatment plants in the region and told the story of how he helped end the draining of oil into the Yamuna near Gau Ghat. He also showed his system of an easy, low maintenance way of cleaning the tributaries before they enter the Yamuna. His passion proved to the students his dedication to cleaning up the Yamuna for the sake of the people living there and for future generations.

Subijoy also talked about the great support on **water quality monitoring** for the Yamuna River to be undertaken by **Dr. Ajay Taneja of the Agra University** as discussions were held with him. The water quality monitoring is planned to be conducted at a few locations of the Yamuna River, at both upstream and downstream of the city of Agra.

All together we had a great story to tell with the hope of inspiring these students. As a team we hoped that today was the day they were going to make changes.

Once we were finished, the students were invited to have tea and cookies outside of the classroom. The team and I stepped out shortly thereafter to go to the principal's office; I walked through the litter of the plastic tea cups and paper napkins... I began to throw a fit. I yelled as I was walking away from the group "You can't do this! This is what is wrong! You can't litter here... What did I just talk about?!" The students giggled as I was being taken into the next room to have tea and cookies with the administration of the school and the rest of the team. Back in the car, I couldn't help thinking... why am I here? Did my words mean nothing? I woke up the

next morning and realized that my message of “start small and do what you can” is a good message... “don’t litter” is not. How can they NOT litter when they don’t have trash cans. And if they do have trash cans, once they are full they get dumped out the window. There isn’t regular hauling of waste. There is one landfill and its many kilometers away. The only way to get rid of your trash is to drop it on the ground. I couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed by the problem.

Our hopes are in the younger generations who do recognize the importance of environmental management and are willing to stay in India to fix them. The response from the students and faculty of the Agra University was quite positive and gave all of us a feeling of great partnership with this esteemed institute in the Region. Sumit collected contact information from these students so he could keep in touch with them and encourage them in their work to clean up the Yamuna. The list of participants, including students and faculty who signed up are compiled and placed on the internet in a password protected spreadsheet file <http://rowfoundation.org/content/yamuna/Yamuna-Secured-Field-workshop-participant-list.xls>. The security code will be e-mailed to all of the participants on this list.